

A SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED.

YOMI HIRASAKA

Illustration by Kantoku

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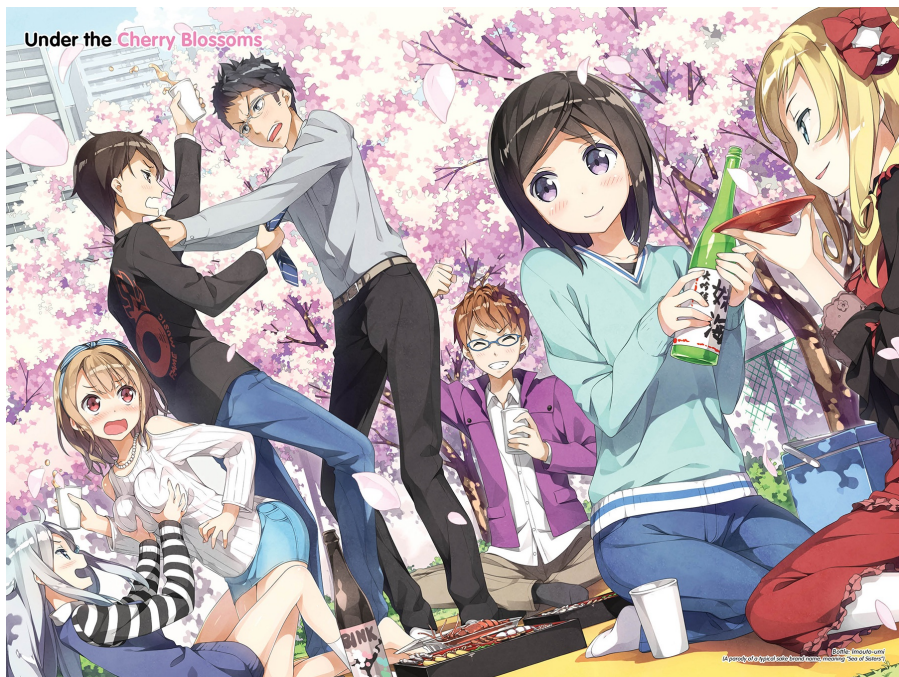
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Under the Cherry Blossoms



A New Kind of Play





Hard at Work

✦ The Novelist Is a Little-Sister-Obsessed F---k II

✦ Cat & Chocolate: Blooming Days

✦ Silly Ass

✦ The Sadist Returns

✦ All for the Sake of My Novels

✦ Bride (?) Versus Brother (?)

✦ Nayuta Kani, Hard at Work

✦ The Art of Emailing Excuses

✦ The Usual Sort of Ending

✦ Chronica Chronicle (Part 2)

✦ It Happens, Man: Anime Adaptation 101

✦ Balmung and Excalibur



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Yomi Hirasaka

illustration by Kantoku

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NEW YORK



Copyright

A Sister's All You Need.

Vol. 2

Yomi Hirasaka

Illustration by KANTOKU

Translation by Kevin Gifford

Cover art by KANTOKU

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IMOTO SAE IREBA II. Vol. 2

by Yomi HIRASAKA

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Illustration by KANTOKU

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A SISTER'S ALL YOU NEED.

ITSUKI HASHIMA

A novelist seeking to devise the ultimate in little-sister characters.

CHIIRO HASHIMA

Itsuki's younger brother. The perfect human being.

NAYUTA KANI

A novelist prodigy 100 percent driven by her love for Itsuki.

MIYAKO SHIRAKAWA

A college student the same age as Itsuki.

HARUTO FUWA

A dashing novelist who made his debut alongside Itsuki.

KENJIRO TOKI

Itsuki's editor.

SETSUNA ENA

A genius illustrator. Pen name: Puriketsu.

ASHLEY ONO

A tax accountant.

The Novelist Is a Little-Sister-Obsessed

F██k II

“Nwooooooorrrrrhhh!!”

Upon waking up and heading for the bathroom, I found my naked sister there, unleashing a hair-raising war cry, her seven arms flailing ominously in the air as she spewed viscous slime all over the room.

“Oh, mornin’,” I nonchalantly replied. The hideous figure before me—a mix of a bobbit worm, a sarcastic fringehead, and an eel goby, all thrown together against the wall—twisted her frame beyond recognition, gnashing her misaligned, weathered teeth like a pair of serrated kitchen knives. “Braaaaaghrr,” she said. This apparently meant she was happy.

“Yeah, you’re looking great today, too.”

“Goggurrrreeehh,” she screamed from her respiratory pores, like the dying groans of a bullfrog except a thousand times more disgusting, as she twitched the millions of dazzlingly colored protuberances that lined what appeared to be her neck like frills. This was how she expressed her bashfulness.

If I had to sum up my little sister in a single word, “monster” would be it. Her height was a minimum of sixteen inches, though it was normally six and a half feet and upward of sixteen feet when she was trying to intimidate her foes. Her entire body was covered in grotesque feelers, protruding objects, and fine hairs, and while she usually had no arms or legs, she could transform her jellylike tentacles, molding them together to achieve the same effect. Across her body, there were a total of fifteen swollen, translucent lumps, each about eight inches in diameter—five on what appeared to be her back, five each upon what would be her shoulders if she were a four-legged creature—and each one contained a floating object shaped like the human brain.

She had intelligence equivalent to a dog, but since she recognized human beings besides myself as nothing but potential prey, it was generally impossible to communicate with her. I wasn’t entirely sure she recognized me at all, and we often had incidents where, while I was sleeping, her slimy excreta would melt my clothes, or she’d wrap her tentacles around my entire body and try to bring me inside hers, or

something. The loathsome, tepid feel of her breath on my skin and the stench pricking my nose would always wake me up, so it was fine by me.

“You tried to eat me last night, too, didn’t you? You know you can’t do that.”

My sister responded to the warning by opening all seven of her mouths wide, gritting her uneven teeth together like jagged saw blades: “Skreeshkreeekkk.” They scratched and clawed at the insides of her mouths, and soon there was a purple liquid dribbling down to the floor, creating small plumes of black smoke where it ate through the tile. I guess she was trying to say she was sorry. Ha-ha! How cute of her.

.....This disturbing ecological description of the freakishly vile and nauseating little sister continued for over ten pages, as did the distressing psychological description of the protagonist gently watching over her.

“...What is this?”

Editor Kenjiro Toki could take no more. He tossed the manuscript on the table, his face drained of strength. It was early afternoon, not long into March, inside an apartment building chiefly housing students. In front of Toki was a young man, looking perfectly resolute with his arms crossed. This was Itsuki Hashima—one of the novelists whom Toki edited, and the man who’d come up with this insane concept in the first place.

“What is this?” Toki dared to ask again, and the reply was completely earnest.

“Practice.”

“Practice?”

“Yeah, I thought I’d really nail down what the main little-sister heroine should look like before I crafted a full outline.”

“Ah.”

Toki nodded. When coming up with a new series, a lot of authors chose to begin by writing small snippets of the main turning points of the novels—conversations, battles, sex scenes—to grasp an image of the story first. Editors appreciated these excerpts just as much, since it gave them an idea of things like story atmosphere, which are hard to express with a simple description or plot outline. If the novel was based on little more than rambling slice-of-life episodes, it was common to provide a couple dozen sample pages alongside the pitch sheet, since a story summary wouldn’t really show why the novel would attract a readership.

“So...what is this?” Realizing that this manuscript was a test piece for his writer’s new project only made it all the more enigmatic for

Toki.

"I wanted to see how much people could love this little sister based solely on her being a little sister."

"Ah. So that's why you've done away with everything except the 'sister' appellation? She's not some beautiful woman; she's not even human; we're not even entirely sure about her gender. She's got zero mascot-style cuteness, so it's not even like Œufcoque from *Mardock Scramble* [an intelligent talking mouse]. Nothing about her looks indicates any kind of little-sister-ness, unlike Dolores from *Zone of the Enders* [a giant robot] or Tsumugi from *Knights of Sidonia* [who's got tentacles]. You can't communicate with her. She's a foul, grotesque, acid-spitting monster who's even willing to eat herself. And you wanted to see whether just calling her a 'little sister,' in and of itself, would get readers to accept it?"

"Yes! Right, exactly..."

The relief was clear in Itsuki's voice. Finally, someone understood him.

"...And what are the results?" Toki asked.

"The results?"

"Can you get yourself to feel for this otherworldly monster at all?"

The question silenced Itsuki for a moment or two.

".....I'm just barely okay with it, maybe...?" he managed to work out, eyebrows raised,

"You're *okay* with it." Toki shuddered. "Well, if a little-sister-obsessed f██k like you is 'just barely' okay with it, any normal person would never be. It'd be one hundred percent impossible for a sane adult to recognize this as the hero's sister at all."

"...You think?" It was dawning on him now, too. Muttering, Itsuki turned his eyes downward. "...Why? I've got the power of a sister with me, but...what is a little sister, anyway...? Nnnngh..."

His thoughts had taken him to a dead end, not that Toki would have realized it. His editor sighed at him.

"I'm glad you're so enthusiastic about coming up with new projects, but you're still working on your other stuff, right?"

Ever since Itsuki willfully trashed the idea last month for his project *Demon Hunter in Scarlet* (final title TBD), he had been thinking up new ideas and pitching them at Toki, one after the other. Working on new titles was important, and the editor side of Toki wanted to compliment him for being passionate enough about it to write snippets on spec like this—but Itsuki Hashima already had two ongoing series, *Sisterly Combat* and *All About My Little Sister*. The new volume of *Sisterly Combat* was set to go on sale next month, but only about half of the manuscript was complete.

"You sent me up to chapter four of *Sisterly Combat*, Volume 5 last

month, but I haven't heard a thing about it since. You're still good for it, right?"

Toki squinted hard at him. Itsuki averted his own eyes.

"Oh, was that how it was? Ha-ha-ha... I thought I sent more of it, too, but maybe I didn't..."

"...If you have any more of it than that, I'd like to see whatever you've completed."

"Um, yeah, I mean, you know I'd love to show it to you, or even, like, send it to you right now, but I'm right in the middle of writing this *super*-exciting scene. It'd feel like a total anticlimax if I showed you right now, so I'll save it for when I reach a nice closing point in the story."

"...All right. I'll wait a little bit longer, then... But you *are* good for it, right?"

Itsuki flashed a brazen smile at Toki's doubtful gaze. "Ha-ha-ha! Fear not, my friend! This is starting to feel like the greatest thing I've ever written...even as I'm writing it! So just kick back, relax, and prepare to be amazed!"

"Well, it's coming out next month, so I can't 'kick back and relax,' exactly...but if that's how you put it, I look forward to it."

"Right! Trust me, you're in good hands here, ha-ha-ha!"

Toki had little else to say to Itsuki before he left, still looking anxious. Once he was gone, Itsuki flopped down on the bed, winced, and groaned.

"...Oh, shit... What am I gonna do...?"

KENJIRO TOKI

AGE: 26

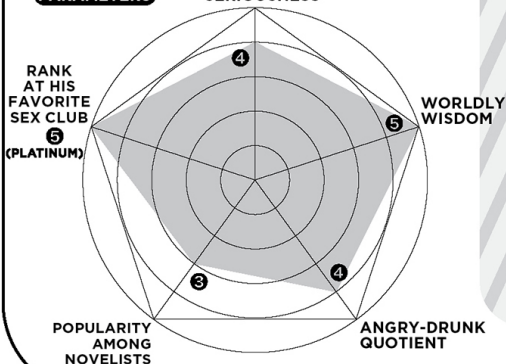
Itsuki's editor. In addition to Itsuki, he also handles a number of other annoyingly unreliable writers. Known around the office as "Kenken." He seems to have some kind of love-related trauma in his past.

LIKES: Sex clubs

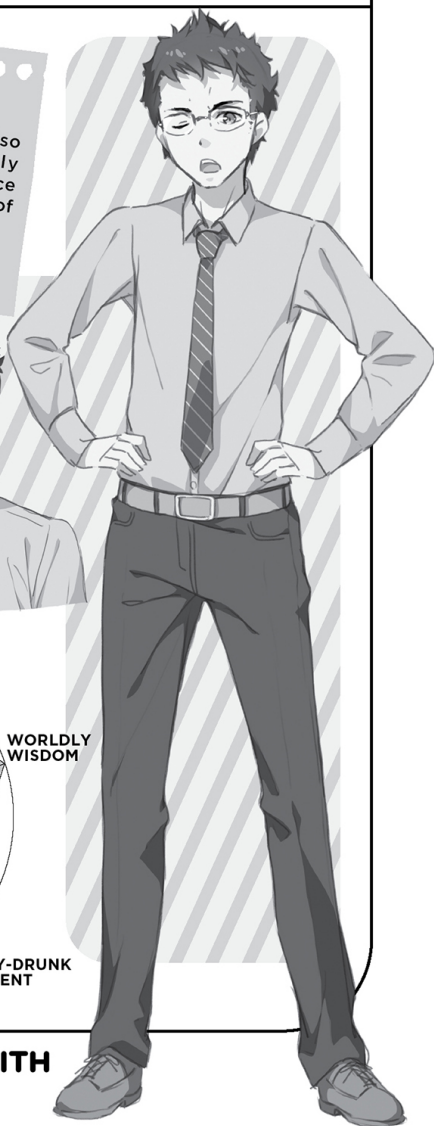


PARAMETERS

SERIOUSNESS



**A WORLDLY-WISE MAN WITH
A DARK SIDE TEMPERED
ONLY BY PAYING FOR
FEMALE COMPANY**



Cat & Chocolate: Blooming Days

The convenient location of Itsuki Hashima's apartment, about a five-minute walk from his publisher, meant his place was often a hangout spot for many of its other writers. Right now, there were two of them—Haruto Fuwa and Nayuta Kani—seated by the *kotatsu* heated table, along with Miyako Shirakawa, one of Itsuki's buddies from his short stint in college.

Haruto was at work on his tablet PC, but Nayuta and Miyako were playing a round of Ghosts, the two-player board game.

In it, players maneuvered their team of eight ghost pegs—four “good” and four “evil”—around a six-by-six grid, taking pieces from each other like in chess. Victory was won by either taking all four of their opponent's good ghosts, having the opponent take all four of their own evil ghosts, or maneuvering a good ghost into the opponent's exit. Since a ghost's good/evil status was shown only by a dot on its rear (blue for good, red for evil), there was no way for a player to know the status of their opponent's pieces. It became important, then, to guess them through how the opponent moved, as well as your knowledge of their personality.

The game offered simple rules but a pretty intense psychological battle of wits, making it a popular selection for a quick two-player game in this apartment.

“Oops! And that's blue.”

“Dahh, you beat me again!” Miyako exclaimed as Nayuta took her fourth good ghost.

“That makes five in a row for me, Myaa.”

“Mngh,” Miyako muttered at the smiling Nayuta. “Why do you always take just my good ghosts all the time? You didn't secretly mark the good pieces somehow or something, did you?”

“Oh, I'd never cheat that way.”

“You *suuuure*?”

She scowled back, and Haruto had to smile next to her. “You're just too readable, Miyako,” he interjected.

“Right. You give away everything.” Nayuta nodded.

“Everything...? I think I'm usually pretty good at hiding things...”

“Oh, don't be silly, Myaa. It's rare to run into people as easy to

read as you these days,” Nayuta replied with a smile.

Miyako’s reaction was, in fact, a bit hard to read at this observation. She had, after all, been “hiding” something from Nayuta for a while now.

“All right,” Haruto said, putting his tablet in his bag. “I’m at a good point in this story, so lemme get in on a game of something.”

“Oh, all right, I guess. I’d feel bad about bullying Myaa any more than I am anyway.”

“I’ll beat you next time, okay?!”

“Something easy-breezy for three players... Maybe Love Letter, or Too Many Cinderellas, or Deep Sea Adventure... Do you play board games a lot, Miyako?”

Miyako shook her head at Haruto. “No, just whatever I’ve played with Itsuki and Nayu when I’m here. Have you been playing them for a while, Fuwa?”

“Nah, not really until about two years ago. Before that, I hadn’t played much of anything except for Life with my family. I’ve been doing tabletop RPGs since college, though.”

“Wow, that’s not too long at all.”

Haruto gave a wistful chuckle at this. “Well, me and Itsuki got invited to this game meetup that was being held by this one veteran writer, and we had a lot of fun there. So we bought a couple of the more famous ones, like Dominion and Carcassonne, and started playing them all the time. I actually bought probably, like, seventy percent of the board games in this apartment.”

“Really?!”

“Yeah,” Nayuta confirmed. “Whenever Prince Manwhore buys a new game online, he just has it shipped here.”

“Well, sure. We’re gonna play ’em here anyway, so that just makes it easier. And stop calling me Prince Manwhore.”

Haruto gave the room a carefree smile.

“So how ’bout we get started? Love Letter’s always a nice go-to for kicking off with... Oh, but lemme get some drinks out before we begin. Do you like fruit beer?”

Miyako nodded as Haruto went to the kitchen, helped himself to some glasses like he owned the place, and took out a bottle of Lindemans Framboise and some root beer, pouring each into its own glass. He had purchased most of the beer, cheese, ham, and other snacks in the fridge as well, and Nayuta had started making sure that it always contained a few bottles of her preferred brand of root beer. Otherwise, the fridge had the ingredients, condiments, and premade food from Itsuki’s younger brother Chihiro, along with some Valentine’s chocolate sent by fans. Very little in it actually belonged to the guy who rented the apartment.

After some [root] beer and a few Love Letter games, the trio felt a pair of spiteful eyes aimed at them.

“...You sure sound like you’re having fun...”

Itsuki, who was currently up shit creek over Volume 5 of *Sisterly Combat*, had been working at his desk ever since the others showed up.

“Yep. How’s it going with work?”

“It’s not,” he curtly replied to Haruto, his eyes resembling those of a dead fish.

“Oh, no? Well, have fun.”

“Why do you have all the time in the world right now, Haruto...? Your next volume goes on sale next month, too, doesn’t it?”

Volume 13 of *Chevalier of the Absolute World*, the anime version of which was set to launch next month, would hit the shelves at the same time as *Sisterly Combat*, Volume 5.

“You mean Thirteen? I submitted that manuscript two months ago.”

“What the...?!”

“Huh?! ”

This stunned both Itsuki and Nayuta into silence.

“I heard before that you never missed a deadline...but finishing a volume three months before the sale date? That’s unheard of...!”

“Yeah! Talk about coming early! Not only are you a manwhore, but you have no stamina! You’re beyond saving now!”

“I’m not either of those things,” Haruto hastened to say. “And why’s that a big surprise to you all? Other publishers basically demand you turn it in two or three months before the sale date.”

The thought made Itsuki involuntarily shudder.

“Three months as a default? Are you kidding me...? Can all of their authors stop the flow of time or something? Or do they have a Hyperbolic Time Chamber set up inside the office...?”

“Yeah, well, at the same time, with some publishers out there, you can wrap up the manuscript a week before launch and they still get the book published in time, somehow. I heard that’s how it pretty much always is with ●●●●.”

“Ooh, mine would delay it for sure if I did that. What kind of magic are they using?”

“I dunno, but if it’s a publisher that releases weekly magazines, then they can do that, too, somehow.”

“Oh. So magazine publishers have given up on being sane human beings, too, huh?”

Nayuta sighed. “Well, it’s thanks to Super Saiyans like you that regular earthlings like us who write at normal speed all look lazy. It’s a real pain, you know?”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Itsuki stood up from his chair, taking out a glass for himself before settling down by the kotatsu.

“You’re okay workwise?” Miyako asked.

“...Hey, sometimes we need a change of pace to recharge,” Itsuki replied, failing to look her in the eye.

“Okay, wanna bust out a four-player game?” Haruto offered.

“Yep.”

Itsuki nodded, and Haruto thought for a moment.

“Let’s see... Well, if you got writer’s block, how about Cat & Chocolate? Maybe it’ll help you come up with something.”

“You don’t need to look out for me... Eh, whatever.”

Nayuta nodded her own agreement as Itsuki pouted.

“What kind of game is it?”

Haruto took the game box off the shelf as he explained it to Miyako. At its core, Cat & Chocolate was a game where players used items in their possession to deal with assorted problems. It was sold in several packages, covering situations from a haunted house to school and office life.

They had picked Blooming Days, the “school” version, to play today. In it, players were tasked with solving crises like “Summer vacation is over and you haven’t done any of your homework” or “You’re on a class trip and get separated from everyone else.” To do so, one would take the item cards randomly dealt to them and use them to explain to the others how you’d solve the issue. If a majority of the other players thought your story was a valid solution to the problem, you earned a point.

Players were always given three cards but didn’t get to decide how many cards to actually play in their stories—the number required was given to them. One might think that using lots of cards at once would make it easier to solve the problem, but instead it became more of a challenge, figuring out how to weave these (often) useless items into the tale.

While it was more of a casual party game than a seriously competitive one, to authors it was a godsend—letting them make the **excuse** that it was “exercising their creative muscles” and not wasting time. And given the conceptual skills it asked for, among writers it could turn into a scarily intense battle of wills, much like Turtle Soup from before.

Haruto dealt three cards to all the players. “All right, let’s decide who plays first. The rules say ‘The first player is the one who’s enjoying (or enjoyed) their school life the most.’ So, uh, which one of us had the most ‘normal’ time in school?”

“...I was bullied until I dropped out.”

“...I joined a club that fell apart over sex drama.”

“...Not to brag or anything, but I didn’t have any friends.”

Nayuta, Haruto, and Itsuki each made their confessions robotically. A heavy gloom filled the apartment. In response to this sudden onrush of bad memories, Miyako—the only current student in the room—limply raised her head.

“Geez! Well, I’m having a pretty good time at school, all right?!”

“Great, so we’ll go clockwise from Miyako.”

“I look forward to seeing what a well-adjusted college girl can do here, Myaa.”

“Um, sure. Like, I’m all over this. So you just use these item cards to solve problems?”

Miyako turned over the top card in the “event” deck in the middle of the table.

“Umm... ‘Terrorists have occupied the school.’ ...Wow, what am I supposed to do about that?”

“Oh, this one’s easy.”

“Yeah, there’s a ton of ways to approach that.”

“Nice stroke of luck there, Myaa.”

Miyako looked at the other three in shock. “...Are you guys being serious? And how is this a ‘school life’ issue at all?”

“Hey, schools get attacked by terrorists all the time. It’s a given.”

“Not in my world, it’s not...”

Each event card had a number between 1 and 3 on it, with the current player required to use that number of cards in their story to solve the event. This particular card had a 2 on it, which meant Miyako had to use two cards from her hand to save the school from the threat of terrorism.

“Hmm... Wow, I really don’t know what I should do...”

She took a few minutes to mull it over before finally plunking down her first card. It showed a student in a gym outfit.

“Um, first I change into this gym outfit...”

Then she revealed her second card—a set of vaulting boxes.

“Then I’ll hide inside these boxes until help arrives... The end.”

She looked at the other three players, gauging their responses.

“Hiding... Yeah, that’s a pretty normal approach,” Itsuki commented.

“Was there much need to change into gym clothes for that?”

“W-well, what else could I do?” Miyako protested at Haruto’s jab. “I had to use two cards, so...”

“Okay, let’s do a little simulation, then,” said Nayuta.

“Simulation?”

As Miyako gazed at her in confusion, Nayuta blandly explained. “...So you’re in your gym clothes, Myaa, inside a dark gymnasium, hiding inside some wooden vaulting boxes. You’re wearing those tight

gym bottoms, leaving your long, plump legs fully exposed. Then a terrorist comes in to see if anyone's hiding. He says 'Hey, look at these wooden boxes.' And then... Well, there you go. He'll check them out and find you, Myaa."

"Wha?!"

"...Yeah, anyone would check out the boxes," Itsuki observed. Haruto nodded his agreement.

"And remember, like I said, inside those boxes is a college student, practically about to burst out of her gym suit, with that itty-bitsy bottom and curvy bare legs!"

"...Any terrorist would love that," Haruto dispassionately commented.

"Love it how?!"

"Then Myaa would be taken out of the boxes and lain down on the floor. 'Ah-ha-ha! This girl's gonna be all mine!' 'Geh-heh-heh... It's been far too long for me. I'm gonna have some fun today!' 'Ooh, I—I want 'er to keep the bottom on for me while we're doing it!' 'Ha, you creep...' And so begins a scene straight out of a porno manga."



“Too bad about those gym clothes,” Itsuki said. “We coulda saved you otherwise.”

“Ooooh...”

Miyako looked about ready to cry, envisioning terrorists ravaging her. In the end, all three of her opponents ruthlessly voted “no” when asked if her story solved the problem.

“Okay, my turn.”

Itsuki picked up an event card from the pile.

“...‘You accidentally called your teacher “Mom,” and it’s super awkward!’”

“Ha-ha-ha! Yeah, that would suck!”

“Pretty much the end of your social life, if you do that in high school.”

Haruto and Nayuta both laughed at the idea, while Itsuki’s eyes turned toward some faraway point in the horizon.

“My mom died when I was in middle school, so...maybe I kind of saw her in some of the female teachers I had...”

“...Ah... Hey, um...sorry.”

“...Sorry.”

Haruto and Nayuta both awkwardly turned their eyes away, leaving Miyako unsure what to do, if anything.

Itsuki rushed to speak. “Oh, don’t worry about it! Umm, so I have to use one item card. I’ll make it this one!”

He played a card showing one of those anatomical models of the human body seen in science classrooms worldwide.

“I’d play it off as a joke, like ‘Whoa, I was wondering why my mom was here in school for a second, but it was actually this model all along! Ha-ha-ha! Hoo boy!’ ...How’s that?”

Despite the clear enthusiasm Itsuki had for the idea, the response was lukewarm at best.

“Ahh, yeah, that’s good, ha-ha...”

“It certainly is, yes, ah-ha...ha...”

They all voted “yes” for the story, although the atmosphere surrounding them still felt kind of sketchy.

“Okay, I’m next.” Haruto turned over an event card. “‘You have serious bed head.’ Solve with three cards, huh...?”

“If you had my ‘hair gel’ card, this would be no problem, huh?” Miyako flashed a card of her own.

“Well, that’s how this game works. You never have the item you need when you actually need it.” Haruto chuckled, then thought for a few moments. “...All right, let’s go with this.”

The first item he put down was a hairband.

“I put on this hairband.”

“Okay... Wait, huh? But isn’t that enough to take care of bed head right there?” Miyako looked at Haruto, puzzled.

“Well, next up is this... A medaka fish.”

“A fish?!”

“Yeah, I take a fish from the aquarium, put it on my head, and watch my balance real carefully so it doesn’t fall off. Then, right at the end... This guitar card. If I’m strumming a guitar with a fish on my head as I’m walking to school, nobody’s gonna comment on what my hair looks like!”

“Well, of course not! They’ll start to think you’ve gone crazy!”

“Yeah, but I did solve the bed-head problem!”

Haruto resolutely pleaded his case, even as he recognized how silly it was. He had to use the fish and guitar cards in addition to the hairband, when the hairband alone would’ve been enough to solve the problem. Thus, he had to overdo it a bit.

“But... The whole reason you want a solution to bed head is because it’s socially awkward to have it, right? If you make that problem even bigger, I don’t think that gets to the root of it...”

Miyako didn’t seem fully satisfied, but when it came down to the votes, Itsuki and Nayuta overruled her with their “yes”es.

“Nice!” Haruto shouted, pumping his fist a little in the air.

“Whaaa?! How is that okay?!”

“Ahh, it was funny, so...”

“Mm-hmm. Imagining Prince Manwhore walking around with a fish on his head playing guitar made me laugh, so I vote yes.”

Miyako looked at them both, now more dubious than ever. All voting in this game was based on the players’ own subjective views, so even if it didn’t fully solve the problem, stories could be acceptable just for being amusing. This made it important to think about the personalities of the other players.

“I suppose I’m up next,” Nayuta said. “Umm... ‘You broke a window.’ Solve with three items...”

She looked at her hand for a while, pondering the possibilities. Then:

“Okay, here it is!”

She slapped all three cards on the table. They were a fire extinguisher, a dumbbell, and a motor scooter—immediately making Miyako and crew wonder how the hell she intended to explain this.

“First, I swing the dumbbell around to break all the other windows that aren’t broken.”

“Huh...?”

Despite Itsuki’s blank look, Nayuta continued, her demeanor oddly calm.

“...Crash, smash, crunch. The noise is so satisfying as I shatter

each and every pane of glass. Some teachers will try and stop me, of course, but I knock them down with a blast from the fire extinguisher, then swing the dumbbell to silence them.”

“Uh, N-Nayu...?”

Nayuta’s smile deepened.

“So, taking up my empty fire extinguisher and bloodstained dumbbell, I start bashing up the windows and walls with greedy delight. Then I drive the scooter up and down the halls at top speed, throwing the dumbbell and swinging the fire extinguisher around to vandalize the school even more. Break it up, break it up, break it, break it, break it break it break it break it *break it break it break it all!!* Ha-ha-ha! You should just rip that school a new one! They didn’t do a thing to help me! I hated them all! They should just die!!”

“Kanikou, calm down!”

Itsuki gave Nayuta a bop on the head, bringing her back to the real world.

“Oh... Itsuki? I’m sorry... Guess that flipped some kind of weird switch in my head, or something...”

“Y-yeah...”

Haruto and Miyako were supremely unnerved at this unexpected glimpse into Nayuta’s darker side.

“So, uh, that’s pretty much the same approach that I took; causing an even bigger problem to mask the original one. Everyone who wants to give the okay to that approach, raise your hand.”

Itsuki raised his hand. Haruto and Miyako did not, but Nayuta was overjoyed at Itsuki’s choice, almost to the point of tears.

“Itsuki...! I’m glad to see you understand me, at least!”

“...Well, vandalism isn’t all that great, but sometimes violence really is the only solution, so...”

“Oooh, I love you, Itsuki! You’re the only one who can save me! I’d let you do anything to me! Please, just ruin me!”

“Sh-shut up! Get away from— Ah! You dumbass!”

Peeling Nayuta and her hug away from his body, Itsuki stood up.

“Okay, change of pace complete. I’m going back to work.”

“Yeah, hang in there!” Haruto said as he started putting the cards away.

As he did, Miyako picked up another card from the event deck, wondering what kind of problem would’ve come up if they’d played a second round.

The event: “You’ve fallen in love with the same person as your best friend.”

Her heart skipped a beat.

“What’s up, Myaa?”

“N-nothing,” she said as she hurriedly returned the card to the pile and handed it to Haruto.

You’ve fallen in love with the same person as your best friend...

What kind of items could she possibly use to solve *that* problem?

Miyako had no idea at all.

Silly Ass

It was the middle of March, and Itsuki was working in his apartment when Setsuna Ena paid a visit. Setsuna, under the pen name Puriketsu, was a professional illustrator; he did the art for *Genesis Sisters of the New World*, Itsuki's second series, and they had been hang-out buds ever since.

Aw man, Itsuki's head told him, I got a sudden guest, I guess I'll have to abandon work for now... I really wanted to work, but I can't just ignore my visitor... Ooh, I was soooo getting into it, too...

He continued to mutter along these lines to himself as he picked out Battle Line, a two-player card game modeled after historical combat in ancient times, and started playing with Setsuna.

"...So you still runnin' from your editors?" Itsuki asked as he scoped out his cards.

Setsuna laughed and shook his head. "Oh, not at all! I'm just back from a plain old prep meeting with the edit team today."

At the moment, he was doing illustrations for *SILLIES*, a series by author Yohei Kitagata. In addition to playing on the English word "silly," it was also a pun on *shiri*, the Japanese word for "rear end"—and as the plural suggested, Kitagata's wacky rom-com tale featured ladies who exposed their asses a lot.

Setsuna was known widely for his tushie work—adding just that little extra jiggly touch to them—and Kitagata had all but insisted on him joining the project, declaring "only Puriketsu could do the illustrations any justice!" It worked out well, and the series was apparently selling rather nicely.

Volume 5 had come out almost a month ago, but the illustrations weren't done until well after any agreed-upon deadline. It forced *SILLIES* editor Kenjiro Toki to track Setsuna all the way to Hokkaido, confine him in a local hotel room, and make him wrap it up in time. Itsuki had had a front-row seat to all of this as it unfolded, so he was aware how it'd panned out.

"Could you show me your ass for a second?"

Itsuki was too busy wondering where to place his next card for Setsuna's sudden question to register with him immediately.

“...Huh? My ass...? ...My ass?!”

“Yeah.”

Setsuna nodded solemnly at Itsuki's wild scream.

“Why do I have to show you my ass...?!”

“What's the big deal? It's not like the end of the world or anything.”

“It'll be the end of any pride I had in myself!”

“Look, all you have to do is stand here, face backward, and drop your pants for a sec. I'm just gonna look at your ass! That's it!”

“No!”

“Okay, how about halfway down the crack?”

“Halfway...? That's even *more* embarrassing!”

“Okay, then all the way!”

“No, how 'bout no way, man? ...I mean, what's driving you to ask me, even?”

He had to ask. Setsuna was awfully earnest about this.

“Well, you know, I think I'm falling into a rut.” The illustrator sighed, looking a little uncharacteristically discouraged. “Like, I'm having to draw asses all day and night for *SILLIES*, right?”

“Yeah. Some nice ones in the latest volume, too.”

SILLIES wasn't really Itsuki's cup of tea, there being no little sisters among the main cast. They were all the same age as or even *older* than the main protagonist. But he still bought and read each volume.

The sensuality of Yohei Kitagata's prose, a talent he also exercised in his scripts for assorted adult video games, was enough even to excite Itsuki—and the asses on the heroines, as Setsuna drew them, had an overwhelming, magnetic effect on the viewer, regardless of their personal tastes.

“I like drawing asses and all, but now that I'm drawing nothing but asses all the time, I'm starting to, like, lose interest, and stuff. Or, like, the composition of my illustrations is starting to all look the same to me. It's hard to drum up excitement for it.”

“Oh...”

Each volume of *SILLIES* featured a cover where one of the heroines' ass cracks was visible, two or three pages of ass illustrated in color (involving several of the female cast), and six to eight pages of black-and-white ass, plus a few bonus illustrations meant as exclusive tie-ins with certain book or anime shops—all full of yet more ass.

“Mr. Kitagata pretty much leaves the clothing, the undies, and the art composition fully to me. Which is fine and all, but, you know, all this ass all the time, it’s hard to come up with new ideas... I don’t wanna draw the same setup twice in the same book, either, so...”

The amount of detailed instruction given to illustrators varied greatly depending on the editor or author, the illustrator themselves, and the story or situation being depicted. Sometimes the author would ask for exact perspectives and other details; others would just provide an excerpt from the manuscript to draw on. More than a few would name only a couple characters and leave everything else to the illustrator’s imagination, including clothes and positioning—then adjust their own writing to match the final art. No one way was more “correct” than any other; it was case by case.

For *Genesis Sisters of the New World*, Itsuki first talked with Toki about the situations and characters to illustrate (for scenes with a lot of characters in one place, they’d generally pare it down to a subset to depict in the art). For important scenes that Itsuki could picture clearly in his mind, he went into as much detail as possible in his instructions to Setsuna; otherwise, he generally left things in his hands. That was how Itsuki worked with all the other illustrators he had been paired with. His characters often tended to be described as having “long, black hair,” “comfortable clothing,” “battle-worn armor,” “noticeably large chests,” and other loosely defined features, sometimes leading the artists to offer feedback like “Please go into more detail with the hairstyle and clothing” or “You mention she has huge tits, but exactly how large are you envisioning?”

“...All right. I can see your problem. So how does that connect to me showing my ass to you?”

“I’m looking for more input, is all. I need to supplement my ass diet with new asses so I can get more ideas for them.”

“Your ass diet...? What, like taking supplements?”

Despite the jab, Itsuki saw the reasoning behind Setsuna’s thoughts. He needed good input in order to provide good output.

“But important though ‘input’ may be, how will *my* ass provide that? I don’t really see how.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that.” Setsuna gave Itsuki an almost imperceptible smile. “But I really do need to beef up my ass diet, y’know? That’s the only way.”

“...?”

He smiled more broadly as Itsuki raised his eyebrows at him.

“So how ’bout we go look at some women’s asses instead, sir?”



Four hours later, Itsuki and Setsuna were at a hot-spring resort, not far from a town situated by the ocean. Not any normal hot spring, though—this one had an open-air bath that allowed both sexes to share the same water.

A net search along these lines had revealed a place that appeared to have an okay enough view and some decent food; one phone call later, they had a room booked with dinner and breakfast included.

The moment the two of them were guided into their room, Setsuna picked up a towel and the hotel-provided *yukata* bathrobe.

“Great! Time to scope out some ass!”

“What, already...? Can’t we chill out for a bit first? I mean, it wouldn’t be too late if we waited ’til after dinner...”

Despite his hesitation, Itsuki had somewhat similar motivations as his friend—he had hit a wall in his writing, and he needed to refresh and take in some more input. So he easily accepted Setsuna’s invite and came along with him, but mixed-gender bathing was a wholly unfamiliar experience. Even looking at the naked female body hadn’t been in the cards for him since puberty—well, okay, there was that one quick glance when Nayuta more or less streaked across his room after showering at his place—but otherwise, no.

“Aw, c’mon, sir, no wimping out now!” Setsuna laughed as Itsuki blushed back at him. “You have girls stripping naked in your novels all the time, don’tcha?”

“Th-that’s not real life! And I’m not wimping out!”

“So let’s go, sir. We gotta hurry, or else the sun’s gonna set on us!”

It was approaching the evening hour, and the Internet reviews went on about how awesome it was to watch the sun set over the sea in your open-air bath. Missing that *would* be a waste of a good opportunity.

“Ergh... All right. Let’s go.”

Finally steeling his resolve, Itsuki followed Setsuna toward the hot spring. The changing rooms were divided by gender, and for that matter, so was the large indoor bath that greeted visitors before reaching the mixed-sex open-air springs.

“Hmm-hmm-*hmmmm*... Hm-hm-hm-hm-*hmmmm*...”

Setsuna was humming “High Pressure” from T.M.Revolution as he all but flung his clothes off his body. He was naked in record time.

“Whoa...?!”

Itsuki couldn’t help but stare openly at his frame. He was small, but *cut*, with a visible six-pack and everything. They were both the same height and shaped about the same when clothed, but in the nude, the difference was abundantly clear. With no abs or any other muscles to speak of, Itsuki was a weakling by comparison.

“...I feel betrayed.”

“Huh? What d’you mean?”

“...Nothing.”

Disrobed down to his undies, Itsuki tried sucking his stomach in as much as he could. No six-pack resulted. He had always been a bit of a pasty wisp of a kid, but living the author’s life of holing up in a room all day had served to make his skin look even more unhealthily pale.

“Hey, how long’re you gonna keep your undies on for? Let’s get going already!” Setsuna eagerly shouted as Itsuki considered signing on for a gym membership. He was doing an excited little dance, his junk bobbing up and down as he carried on. That, too, outclassed Itsuki’s by a notable amount. It didn’t cheer him up any.

“Ugh...”

Groaning dejectedly, he took off his underpants, deftly hiding his genitals under a towel to protect them from prying eyes.

“Okay, all set.”

“Sweet! Wow, sir, you really do have a cute ass.”

“H-hey! Don’t look at it, you dick!”

Itsuki hurried ahead along the trail, cheeks red, and in another moment, they were at the main open-air spring. The sun was right in front of them, hung low above the ocean horizon...

.....and there were so, so many women in the large bath.

Itsuki’s brain froze for several seconds.

They were naked, in the bath, and taking in the majestic view. About twenty of them in all.



As for their ages, they were.....between the late fifties and the eighties, maybe?

They were “mature” women, yes, some beyond “mature” and straight into “granny” territory. No men whatsoever.

“Oooh, look at these cuties! Eee-hee-hee-hee-hee...” one of them purred upon noticing Itsuki and his friend. Her bust had to be close to forty inches, and her hips and rear end were just as well endowed. She was a living force of nature, weathered like a centuries-old tree.

“Oooh, you’re right! Young men like these are quite the rarity, eee-hee- hee-hee-hee...”

The twenty of them were all in the same group, and now all these wizened old powerhouses were staring right at the two newcomers. Itsuki tensed up, turning an eye toward Setsuna.

“Heya, ladies! That’s one damn nice view, isn’t it?”

Setsuna, on the other hand, wasn’t bashful at all. He smiled all the way, his friend swinging downstairs around in the air as he waded into the bath and toward the gaggle of elderly women. Itsuki had to respect that, but instead of joining him, he found himself scurrying over to a nearby washbasin, sitting down and showering as he spied on his friend.

“And where do you little boys come from, hmmm?”

“Oh, Tokyo, ma’am! How about you fine ladies?”

“Ohhh, myyyy, eee-hee-hee!” “Fine ladies?” Well, I never, ohh-hoh-hoh!” “Goodness me, I don’t think anyone’s called me a ‘fine lady’ in at least five years, dah-hah-hah-hah!” “Five years? My stars, I think you mean fifty, meh-heh-heh!” “Too bad we’re all just a bunch of wrinkly old biddies, mmm-hmm-hmm?”

“Oh, don’t be silly! Pretty girls like you, you’re beautiful no matter how old you are.”

“Oooh, it’s ‘pretty girls’ now, is it? Eee-hee-hee-hee!” “Oh, my, keep talking like that and you could make a woman fall head over heels for you, ooh hoooh-hoooh-hoooh!” “What a cuuuute little boy you are, geh-heh-heh-heh!”

...Dang, he’s really something...

Itsuki, listening on from behind, shuddered.

“Say, um, I actually work as a professional artist for a living, but do you think I could maybe draw a few of you cute li’l ladies?”

“Ohh myyyyy, geh-heh-heh!” “Are you gonna draw me like one of those nuuude models? Oh-hoh-hoh!” “Well, go right ahead! I’ll take off anything you want me to for the sake of fine art, beh-heh-heh!” “You’re already naked, silly! Boh-hoh-hoh-hoh!” “Oh, right! Eee-hee-hee-hee!” “Ah-ha-ha!” “Meh-heh-heh!” “Hee-hee-hee-hooooh!”

“Cool, thanks!”

Feeling a sudden twinge of horror at this incomprehensible conversation, Itsuki quickly rinsed off, shot to his feet, and made a beeline for the exit.

“Huh? Sir! Hey, sir, what’s up?”

“I—I’m going to the men’s bath!” he shouted, not bothering to turn around as he left the mixed-gender spring behind.



Setsuna still wasn't back in the room by the time dinner was brought out, so Itsuki ate by himself and started writing on his laptop.

"...I'm scared. I don't want to die."

For the first time since he became a Dark Knight, Sieg felt a true sense of fear.

This was the midsection of Volume 5 of *Sisterly Combat*. Sieg, the lone-wolf Dark Knight who was the tale's main hero, had never lost his cool up to this point, no matter how desperate the situation—but now, faced with an enemy more powerful than any he'd stared down before, the fear of death had descended upon him. He would survive, if barely, but it was a major turning point for the story, one of its most important events.

"Now I know. I really know. Sieg's anxiety! His desperation! His fear! His sense of utter defeat! I know it just as well... Sieg...is *me*...!"

Sieg was a character that Itsuki himself looked up to. That made it hard to convincingly depict him losing heart over his weaknesses or fears. But all Itsuki's struggles with it seemed like a thing of the past as he blazed along with his writing.

He reached a good stopping point around two in the morning, a sleepy sense of achievement filling him as he slipped into his bed. Just as he did, Setsuna returned.

"Whew... Think I kinda overdid it."

"...Uh, were you all right?" Itsuki tentatively asked.

Setsuna smiled back at him. "Oh, yeah! That was incredibly inspiring. I'm gonna draw some seriously fine ass now!"

"Yeah, I'm sure that was a lot of inspiration to take in..." Itsuki hesitated, before deciding he was too afraid to ask exactly what happened. "But, I mean, did looking at a bunch of gran— I mean, *mature* butts give you much to work with? The girls you draw kinda skew a lot younger than that."

"Hmm? Well, hell, if I wanted to look at younger asses, I could just walk around the neighborhood and there'd be all kinds of women I could ask, y'know?"

"Oh, um... Yeah?"

Itsuki winced at Setsuna's unhesitant reply. The idea of going up to an unknown woman on the street and striking up a conversation was so alien to him that the idea was hard to comprehend. Will women just show you their ass if you ask nicely? Like, for real? It can't be.

“But, you know, it’s not every day you can look at the asses of those kinds of chicks all at once. Pretty lucky we were here the same night as that big tour group!”

The smile on Setsuna’s face was genuine, unclouded. He was being completely serious.

“W-wow... Uh, ummm, Mr. Ena?”

“Hmm? Hey, why so serious, sir?”

“No, I mean... Like, wow, you’re amazing...”

“Am I? Aw, thanks, man!”

He gave Itsuki a pleasant, if slightly confused, smile, then yawned and flopped into bed. It wasn’t long before he was blissfully snoring.

“Man... Puriketsu’s just unbelievable...”

In terms of the size of his mettle, as well as the size of his member, Itsuki was utterly defeated. He resolved to call him by his last name for a little while, out of respect.

SERIES INTRO

SILLIES

BY YOHEI KITAGATA ART BY PURIKETSU
FIVE VOLUMES ON SALE NOW.

■STORY

Kazuya Ichinose, a small-minded young man interested in nothing but the pursuit of fine female ass, saves a child from a runaway truck, only to be knocked into a coma in the process. Just as his soul almost leaves this world, Kazuya is greeted by an angel with a beautiful butt.

"I will allow you to live," the angel says, "but in exchange, you must find me among the humans in your world, and we must join together in marriage. Do so within a year's time, and you will be allowed to live. If not, you will die."

Thus miraculously saved, Kazuya embarks on a quest to find the angel with the stunning ass—only to be greeted by a proud crowd of bum-a-riffic young ladies. Is the angel among them? So the young rom-com rhapsody begins, featuring a perverted buffoon racing for his life!

■CHARACTERS

Kazuya Ichinose

The protagonist, a perverted buffoon of a high-school junior.

Shinji Ninomiya

Kazuya's best friend, a handsome young man who always hits it off with the ladies—yet never hangs out with any of them. It is revealed in Volume 4 that he is the angel with the fetching ass!

Kenzou Mimura

A macho muscle-man upperclassman. He knows a lot about the women of the school, but none of them give him the time of day.

Yotsuba Yotsuya

A woman with a godly ass.

Iori Itsutsubashi

A woman with a devilish ass.

Rikka Rokubungi

A woman with an ass like the sun.

Nanase Nanamori

A woman with the ass of a fallen angel.

Yakumo Yaegashi

A woman with a Buddha-like ass.

Kuon Kujou

A woman with a masterful ass.

The Sadist Returns

It was three days after Itsuki and Setsuna's road trip to the hot-spring resort. For Itsuki, it was another day at his place, beaver away at Volume 5 of *Sisterly Combat*. He had overcome one major obstacle, but this volume still had a lot of serious plot events to cover, so now was no time to relax.

Haruto was there with him at the kotatsu heated table, drinking beer and reading on his tablet. A comedic manga, apparently, judging by the occasional bouts of snickering and laughing. It ruined Itsuki's concentration.

"Hey, don't you have anything to do? You've been coming here a lot lately," he said, staring pointedly at Haruto.

"I got *stuff*, sure, but I'm pretty much past the brunt of it, I guess you could say. Volume 13 is done on my end, and I just finished up the novella they're gonna include with the DVD and Blu-ray releases."

"...Damn, moving right along, huh? ...Tch."

Haruto chuckled at Itsuki's clear jealousy. "Yeah, I'm just glad I got out of the thick of it pretty early on. Like, seriously."

"...?"

"Well, there's two weeks 'til the anime starts running on TV, right? I'm really starting to get nervous about it."

"Is it that bad?"

"I mean, the anticipation keeps building every day. If I had multiple deadlines to deal with at the same time as this, I'd freak out."

Chevalier of the Absolute World, Haruto Fuwa's novel series, would have its anime adaption air on TV beginning in early April. Haruto had been part of all the script meetings, cast auditions, and recording sessions so far, helping to actively promote the series in anime magazines and Internet streams. At this point, though, his anime-related duties as the original creator were done with; he just had to trust in the staff and wait for the broadcast launch.

"Oh, hey, how 'bout we all watch the episode one TV broadcast in here?"

Itsuki grimaced at Haruto's suggestion. "Huh? Why do I have to watch your anime with you?"

"Aw, come on! I'm too nervous to watch it by myself. We're close

to the publisher here, so I can invite my editor Kawabe, too.”

“Ugggh... All right. So it’ll be me, you, your editor, Kanikou and Miyako?”

“What about Chihiro? I was thinking we could pick up our RPG campaign for a little bit before the broadcast.”

“Mmm, I dunno, we’re talking about a late-night anime broadcast on a weekday, so...”

“Oh, yeah, he’s still in high school, huh? He’s so much more put together than you, I forgot about that.”

“Yeah, thanks. I’ll invite him, anyways.”

“Preciate it. Oh, man, I’m so nervous...”

Then the doorbell rang. Itsuki glanced at the clock, and his face stiffened.

“...Three o’clock... Guess it’s time...”

“Hmm? Did you have a meeting planned with Mr. Toki? You shoulda told me.”

Haruto assumed it was Toki, given how Itsuki clearly wasn’t looking forward to the event.

“...No, not him. Another pro. Someone you know.”

“Someone I know...?”

Some other writer working under the same publisher?

Glancing sidelong at the perplexed Haruto, the extremely nervous-looking Itsuki turned to open the front door. There, he found a blond-haired girl wearing an extremely frilly red dress.

“Hellooooo!”

Tax accountant Ashley Ono flashed him a sadistic smile. Then she noticed Haruto inside. Her smile deepened.

“Hmm? Hmmm? ...Hmm!”

“Ah...gah... Aghhh!”

It was a whisper of a scream, as Haruto’s eyes blew wide open, fear plainly written across his handsome countenance.

“M-Ms. Ono, what are you doing here...?!”

“Well, I’ve finished up Itsuki’s tax return, so I’m giving him his receipts and a copy of the final documents. I didn’t think I’d find you here, though.”

“Ah, ahhh... I see...” Cold sweat poured down Haruto’s face. “So this was the ‘pro’ you meant? A ‘pro’ tax accountant?”

“Hee-hee-hee!” Ashley replied as she removed her shoes, clearly savoring Haruto’s reaction. “It’s been a long time, Haruto. I was expecting to have you as a client this year, too, so it’s a pity I haven’t gotten to see you. Hee-hee...”

“Oh, no, um, that...”

Haruto turned his eyes away from Ashley.

“Oh, you didn’t hire her?” a surprised Itsuki asked.

Haruto was the one who recommended Ashley to him in the first place when he had asked for help with his taxes, so he assumed that he went to her for this year's return as well.

"...You asked me for a talented accountant, and I referred you to one. I didn't say I used her myself," came the awkward, soft reply.

Ashley grinned evilly at this. "Handling your tax strategy last year was so much fun. Itsuki was rather enjoyable himself, but that was *nothing* compared to you."

The memories of about a month ago, when Ashley made him recite the names and content of his assorted pornographic video games and comics over an extended period of time, flashed back into Itsuki's head. His face tensed.

"Haruto... She did it to you, too...?"

"She made me go over all my porn games and manga," Haruto said, eyes glazed over.

"Huh... Same as me, then."

"Hee-hee!"

That evil laugh again from Ashley.

"But Haruto certainly had quite a few to go over... Perhaps around a hundred dirty video games alone?"

"...Dude, how many do you buy?"

Even Itsuki was a bit put off by this.

Haruto blushed. "N-no! I used the averaged tax rate in my return last year, so we had to go over two years' worth of my expenses! I didn't buy a hundred in a single year!"

"A hundred in two years is still pretty amazing..."

"It—it's for research!"

"Ee-hee! Haruto certainly does enjoy his pretty little maid characters, hmm? An obedient little lady, all prim and proper, but always supporting him from behind the scenes?"

"Nh...!"

The shame cascaded across Haruto's face as Ashley revealed his particular brand of fetish.

"Ah, yeah, there's a lot of those characters in *Chevalier*, too, huh? I was kinda thinking they shared a whole bunch of personality traits between them. And they all tended to have maid outfits on, too. So that's your thing?"

"No! I... Okay, it's not *not* my thing, but it's all a calculated part of my strategy. I'm trying to craft characters who'll become popular, so...!"

"I really don't get what the attraction is with maids, though..."

"You start dissing maids, I don't care who you are; you're gonna pay for it!"

“Whoa!”

Itsuki reared back at the suddenly threatening Haruto. He snapped out of it quickly.

“I—I mean... You know, I think any man would like to have a kind, gentle woman devoted to him like that, sort of thing...”

“Yes, and you certainly enjoy defiling such kind, devoted women with your own carnal desires, ee-hee-hee...”

“I—I don’t! I swear!”

“Let me think: *Turbulent Big-Boobed Bondage Maids IV; Right in My Butt, Master: Innocent Slave Bitches in Pure Love; All Mine to Suck On!* (special limited-edition package with a software patch that puts maid outfits on all the female characters’ standing poses)...”

“N-no, I *told* you, that’s all just for research...!”

Haruto scrambled to make excuses for Ashley’s deadpan software list. Given the presence of sequels and special-edition releases in the titles, he didn’t have much of a defense to mount.

Itsuki gave him a cold stare. “What does putting maid clothes on all the standing poses contribute in terms of research?”

“Listening to you regale me in such extreme, lurid detail about the content of those dirty games from dawn to dusk was one of the most wonderful experiences of my life.”

The youth in Ashley’s face made it look like she was sulking a bit.

“I was *so* looking forward to an encore this year, too...”

“I never want to go through that kind of humiliation again, ma’am.”

“Even if I put on a maid outfit for you?”

“Wha...?!”

Haruto opened his eyes wide at Ashley, already imagining it in his mind. An elegant, blond, blue-eyed girl would look absolutely perfect in a traditional Victorian maid’s dress.

“That...umm...ugghh...”

“Dude, Haruto...”

Itsuki stared at him, shocked that he was actually considering it.

“W-wait, no, my mind’s made up about it...”

“Hee-hee! I’d be glad to serve you in the morning, even.”

“Ah...?! S-serve me?! ”

“Yes...in the *dirrrrrty* kind of way.”

“Wh-what are you...?”

Ashley smiled joyously at the stunned Haruto.

“You imagined it just now, didn’t you?”

“Hnngh...”

“Right there, in your mind, you imagined me, in a maid outfit, my pert little lips holding your penis in my mouth. Didn’t you, you silly fool?”

“I—I did *not*!”

Haruto’s face was completely red.

“Oh, you don’t have to deny it...hee-hee-hee... I know how serious-minded you are, so you probably felt guilty about imagining me in such a scandalous state of affairs. But your imaginative skills as an accomplished author couldn’t help but picture it so incredibly vividly...”

“Nnn...gh...”

Haruto, his motivations so accurately guessed, groaned in anguish.

Ashley’s own cheeks reddened a bit. “I’m sure you’ll be recalling that image of me in your head every morning now, when you wake up. You’ll be tormented by the guilt, but—yes—unable to withstand your bodily desires, you’ll pleasure yourself with it, no matter how loathsome it makes you feel. Every day, every day, over and over and over again...”

“Geh... I—I won’t...”

“Ah-ha! I love that look on your face, Haruto. Something about the faces you’re giving me makes me feel so incredibly...tempted...”

“You are just so awful! What do you have against me? Why do you insist on harassing me like this...?!”

Ashley simply laughed at the scowling, tormented Haruto. “*You’re* the awful one here, aren’t you? Simply leaving me all alone, without another word...”

“D-don’t phrase it like I did something bad to you, ma’am! All I did was not contact you about this year’s tax return!”

“I never turn down anyone who knocks on my door—but if they leave me, I never forgive them. That is the philosophy of the Ono Tax Accounting Office.”

“What kind of fantasy-land tax office are you *running*, ma’am?!”

Haruto looked ready to burst into tears. Itsuki, meanwhile, was looking on admirably, wondering internally if this was some new kind of foreplay game on Ashley’s part.

Then Ashley confronted him.

“H-huh?”

“...You’ll come back to me next year, won’t you, Itsuki?”

“I, uh...uhhhh... That’s the plan, I mean... Yes, ma’am.” He nodded.

“Ee-hee! There’s a good boy. Just for that, I’ll be sure to call you ‘big brother’ next time.”

“F-for real?!”

Ashley flashed a nefarious smile at Itsuki as he suddenly sat bolt upright in his chair.

“Ugh... Even if you’re lying, that’s just one line I can’t let you cross... Nngh, dammit...!”

The desperate expression on Itsuki's face only delighted Ashley further.

"Right... I would love to play with you two a little more, but unfortunately, I have other appointments. So, here's your tax return and your receipts. Be sure to keep them in a safe place."

"Yeah..."

Itsuki listlessly accepted the file folder. With that, Ashley went to the front door, put her shoes back on, and then took out another set of papers from her bag.

"Oh, and I've listed a few of my favorite hometown-tax offerings, so take a look when you have a chance. If you think you'll make about as much this year as you did last, it'd be wise to make a donation in the hundred thousands, yen-wise."

"Um, oh, sure... Thank you...?"

Itsuki was a bit confused at this service he hadn't asked for.

The "hometown-tax" system allows taxpayers in Japan to make donations to individual communities located anywhere in the country as part of their tax returns. The donation can be almost fully deducted from their taxes.

It's easy to assume that freelancers can deduct pretty much anything as "business expenses," but that doesn't mean the money they spend on those things is refunded to them; it simply deducts the value of those expenses from their income, as reported in the tax forms. If you work for a business and take a trip, the company will cover the cost of that for you, but freelancers don't have that luxury.

Thus, for example, if the income tax rate is a flat 10 percent, and an author makes a million yen in a year with no extra expenses, they'll have to pay out 100,000 of that yen in taxes. However, if the author can prove that they paid 100,000 yen for research materials or the like, that makes the author's total income 900,000 yen, meaning their tax bill is now just 90,000. In the former case, you're left with a million minus 100k, or 900,000 yen; in the latter, a million minus 100,000 minus 90, or 810,000 yen.

This means a lot of people opt for the former, not bothering to report any expenses at all. If you want to have as much cash on hand as possible after taxes, there's no need to make the effort to buy stuff so you can deduct it from your income; it's best to just save or invest the cash instead. For freelancers, the key to saving money on taxes is figuring out innovative ways to make non-business-related purchases *look* like they're business expenses; spending money in an effort to cut the tax bill would be putting the cart before the horse. You have the choice of either paying a lot of taxes to keep more cash on hand for later, or cutting into your savings a bit to invest more in yourself, and different people make that choice in different ways.

With the hometown-tax system, meanwhile, making a donation as part of that directly deducts from *what you owe in taxes*, not from your reported income. If your tax bill is 100,000 yen and you donate 20,000 yen, your tax bill then becomes 80,000 yen. You might ask what the big deal is, if it's all taxes anyway, but the difference is that the community you donate to usually sends you a thank-you gift, often some kind of local produce. You don't get anything like this for paying "normal" taxes, of course, so getting something nice to eat as part of the bargain is a neat little extra. But some of these thank-yous can be pretty darn tempting—high-grade organic beef for a 10,000-yen donation, or three enormous hairy crabs for 20,000. Some communities even offer travel tickets or free lodging, a great opportunity for writers to save a little money as they journey around for research purposes.

So Itsuki leafed through the hometown-tax material Ashley gave him.

"Hmm... Neat."

She had gone through the trouble of calculating the cost of each hometown-tax donation versus simply buying the product in question, circling her bargain recommendations in red marker. For someone with no loyalty to one Japanese town or another who's just looking for the best deal possible, it was extremely valuable info.

"Um, are you sure I can have this?"

Ashley smiled at the slightly nervous Itsuki. "Well...if you'd like to pay me back for it, perhaps you could give me some of the food or drink you don't use, in case you wind up donating too much."

"That's all you want?"

"I do enjoy good local sake, by the way."

"...I'll keep that in mind. Is that why you circled a lot of sake offers in red marker here? Because you wanted some?"

"Hee-hee-hee! I'd never do something *that* brazen, no. Just feel free to let me have whatever you wind up not needing."

"...Um. Okay. I'll definitely give you whatever sake I get."

"Tee-hee! I'm looking forward to it, *big brother*."

Itsuki's face was flushed with excitement after Ashley left.

"Oh, man, I gotta donate to all the communities offering sake! My little sister deserves the best present I can give her!"

"Whoa, calm down, man! She's not your sister!"

"Huh...?!"

A quick bop on the head from Haruto restored Itsuki to sanity. He probably would've really done it, too, if his friend wasn't there.

"...All but demanding you shower her with gifts... She's one of the most fearsome women I've ever met."

"Going crazy the first time someone calls you 'big brother' is

pretty screwed up, too, but... Yeah. She is.” Haruto sighed a fatigued sigh.

SERIES INTRO

CHEVALIER OF THE ABSOLUTE WORLD

BY HARUTO FUWA ART BY OKINA
TWELVE VOLUMES ON SALE NOW.

■STORY

Asao Tsurugi is your typical high schooler, not particularly noteworthy for anything apart from his proficiency at video games. One day, he's suddenly thrown into Avalon, a kingdom in another world. Avalon is currently being besieged by the Dragons, an enemy whose true nature remains unknown. The only line of defense against them is the Calibres, humanoid robot weapons that can only be piloted by the so-called chosen ones. Asao is granted with the ability to helm Excalibur, the strongest of Calibres that no one before him could handle, and soon, he begins fighting as a knight in Avalon's service.

■CHARACTERS

Asao Tsurugi

A seventeen-year-old kid thrown into the world of Avalon. His talents in the multiplayer robot fighting game *Machina of the Round* earned him the runner-up prize in the national tournament. Chosen by Excalibur, the strongest of Calibres, he is heralded as a heroic savior and plunged into the midst of battle. Gentle-hearted by nature, he demonstrates a cool, calculated head and extraordinary fighting talent in battle. Known as "Arthur" among the Avalonians.

Lancelot

A beautiful blond, blue-eyed, sixteen-year-old girl. The most powerful knight in the kingdom, she pilots the Calibre Aroundight. She is wary and suspicious of Asao at first, thanks in part to his inadvertently peeping on her in the bath, but she later grows smitten with him as they fight together.

Gawain

A thirteen-year-old girl who's both attractive and taciturn. She pilots the Calibre Galatine and looks up to Asao as a big-brother figure.

Roland

A big-breasted, seventeen-year-old older-sister type. She pilots the Calibre Durandal. A bit childish in personality.

Högni

A sharp-tongued, red-haired sixteen-year-old. She pilots the Calibre Dáinsleif. Deep down, she cares about her friends more than anyone else.

■STORY SETTING

Calibres

The descendants of the long-ago rulers of the world. While they normally take the form of weapons, they transform into giant robots when they resonate with the knight they have chosen themselves. Each one seems to have their own consciousness, but they cannot be conversed with, and it is not known how they choose their knights. Each one possesses assorted powers.

Dragons

Monsters from another world that lay waste to the landscape. Their exact nature is unknown, but normal weapons and magic cannot do a thing to harm them.

All for the Sake of My Novels

It was late March, and Itsuki was nude in front of his bathroom mirror. One might expect this to be because he was about to take a shower or soak in the bath for a bit, but this was not the case. Instead, the naked Itsuki had his member tucked between his legs, wriggling his body like Frieza's final form and giving himself bedroom eyes in the mirror as he said, in a wooden falsetto:

“Ooh, big brother... Go right ahead... ♥”

.....

...

Then he stared at the mirror for a moment.

“...No...”

He shook his head. Then, still in Frieza form, he put his arms in a cross in front of him, bunching what breasts he had closer to each other.

“Ooh, my brother, I'm not a child anymore... ♥”

Another few seconds of staring into the mirror. Then, a dead serious look. “No, no, no,” he grumbled.

Itsuki's mind was no stranger than usual. This was all part of his manuscript work.

He was still toiling away on *Sisterly Combat*, Volume 5, and Hilde, the heroine of the tale and the main character's little sister, was confessing her love to Sieg, as naked as the day she was born. Sieg had not really thought of Hilde as anything besides his “dear younger sister” before this point, but now, he would truly be looking at her as a member of the opposite sex.

It was a huge, important scene, far more serious than even the “Sieg's first encounter with the fear of death” bit Itsuki finally wrapped up the other day. Sieg the Dark Knight was a coldhearted warrior, spurning the love (or lust) of countless charming girls who had approached him before now, and now he would recognize his own sister...as a *woman*. It was a big deal.

If a kinda-cute girl confessed her love to you at first sight, that'd

make most young men (including Itsuki) fade into unconsciousness. But Sieg was different. He was a sharp, hardheaded man, and for plot reasons, this scene had to shake him to the very core of his being. Your run-of-the-mill love confession wasn't gonna cut it.

How could Itsuki make this scene as convincing as possible? To answer that question, he was trying to portray Hilde in real life—hence his current bizarre behavior.

“Ooh, big bro... You can do whatever you want with my body... ♥”

—No. Hilde was a more proper girl than that.

“Ooh, big bro, I'm so embarrassed... Don't look too much... ♥”

—That was seriously cute, but he had a feeling it'd be more fitting to make Hilde's core strength the focus, not her shyness.

“I just want to wrap my entire body around you, big brother...♥”

—That didn't seem right.

So Itsuki continued wriggling around Frieza-style as he laid out his best cutesy-girl lines in his falsetto. It is worth noting, again, that he hadn't gone insane. He was being deadly serious about this.

Novelists have to use themselves like this all the time when working with certain plot situations. In order to correctly describe the bounciness of a beautiful girl's boobs, (male) authors will jiggle their **gut fat** in front of the mirror; to figure out how to depict a kiss, authors (again, male) will aggressively smooch their upper arms over and over again. They might call out the names of magic spells or finisher strikes while writing action scenes, or start panting in a high-pitched voice when detailing the sexier parts.

This was all totally common, and Itsuki was sure all other novelists across the world did the same thing. The way this or that author described in such vivid, sensual ways what a breast or a rear end looked like, or how seductive someone's nipples were, or how meltingly hot a kiss was—it was all just some dude poking at himself.

Thus, nothing about Itsuki in Frieza mode was out of the ordinary.

“I want you to be my first, big bro... ♥ ...No!”

“My breasts are pretty big... ♥ ...No!”

“Big bro... Let's have sex... ♥ ...No!”

“I want to do something for you too, big bro... No!”

“Brother... I'm a woman, too, you know... No!!”

“Maybe I should take a straightforward approach... I love you, big bro!!”

Frieza spread her arms out wide and latched on to her pretend big brother.

“Smoooooch...”

And just when he was about to kiss himself in the mirror, he saw someone who wasn't him in one corner of it.

“Kyaaaaaaaa!!!”

Screaming in a cracking voice (since he was still in Hilde mode), he turned around to find Nayuta Kani pointing a smartphone straight at him.

“Wh-why are you here?!” he shouted, his face a vivid shade of red as he reflexively covered his crotch with his right hand and his chest with his left arm...then put both hands down there, realizing he didn't need to hide anything around his upper body, and went from Frieza to normal mode.

Looking concerned, Nayuta said, “Umm... I rang the doorbell and nobody answered, but I could hear someone speaking in a weird voice inside, so I tried opening the door, and I realized it was unlocked. So I went in, and I heard the voice coming from the bathroom, so I checked it out, and you were hiding your dick in your legs and wriggling around naked cooing at yourself, so I thought I should probably get it on video.”

“Erase that video right now! And get out of here, too!”

Kicking Nayuta out of the bathroom, Itsuki hurriedly threw on a pair of underpants. *I've never had a girl see me naked before. Now we'll have to get married... Wait, there's no way that's gonna happen!*

Shooing the ridiculous thoughts away from his mind, he clothed himself and sped for the living room. Nayuta was already by the kotatsu, and he felt she deserved an explanation.

“Um... All right. Look, Kanikou, what you saw was...”

“Oh, don't worry! You were just trying to reenact a scene from your novel, right?”

This was absolutely normal and completely understandable behavior for all writers, so Nayuta, being part of the fold, required no further guidance.

“Oh...um. Yeah. It was that.”

Now Itsuki was relieved. Good thing it was Nayuta who spotted him. If it was Miyako or Chihiro, it would've driven deep cracks into their relationships. He breathed a sigh of relief as he joined her by the table—an action that resulted in a sudden bout of blushing on Nayuta's part.

“Uh, what, Kanikou?”

"The memory of seeing you naked made me kind of excited."

"Well, forget it right now! And did you delete that video?"

Nayuta shook her head. "I don't want to."

"Well, do it! If that gets out, I'll be dead to society!"

"Oh, it's all right. I'm just gonna enjoy it all by myself."

"Don't! I want it off your phone and out of your brain, too, if you can!"

"Huh? I can't do that!"

"Well, just erase the video, then!"

"Is that the tone of voice you use when asking a favor of someone?"

"Ugh... P-please erase the file for me...if you could...!"

He sounded near tears as he made the pleading request.

"Hmmm," Nayuta purred, lips pouting. "Well, can you do one favor for me?"

"Yes! Yes, anything!"

She let out a soft sigh.

"...You know, you really shouldn't say yes so readily to questions like that. You'll make me get all carried away."

"Oh... Yeah? Yeah, I'll bet..."

Itsuki regretted the error, although he didn't really feel like he deserved that chilly analysis.

"...So what do you want?"

"Please let me stay here for a while."

"Huh?!"

As Itsuki yelped stupidly, she continued. "Starting today, they're doing some remodeling work on the kitchen and bathroom in my place. I want you to let me stay here for around two weeks."

"T-two weeks?! How do you expect me to do that?!"

Nayuta had stayed over several times before, either due to missing the last train or the weather making it too iffy to be outside. But those were strictly overnights.

"You're the only person I can turn to," Nayuta pleaded, eyes turned upward to the flinching Itsuki.

"Wh-why can't you stay at some friend's house?!"

"I don't have many friends."

"But you have some, then, right? Like, you know, Miyako?"

"Aw, but Myaa lives with her parents. I'd be such a bother to them if I stuck around that long..."

"And you aren't a bother to me?!"

"Well, you know, we're gonna be married soon anyway, so..."

"We are not! ...Wait, what about *your* parents?!"

"They're staying at a hotel during the remodeling, just the two of them... Looks like I might have a little sister next year, huh?"

“...Let’s keep away from the dirty talk, okay?” Itsuki winced as he recalled his own family. “I mean, are your parents okay with that? Like, their daughter staying in some guy’s room for days on end?”

“Oh, um, yeah. I said I’m staying at my boyfriend’s place, and they said okay.”

“So go to your boyfriend’s place!”

“Aw, c’mon, Itsuki, I’m talking about you.”

“Stop making stuff up! Wait... You’re saying that your parents are okay with me?!”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Don’t give me ‘mm-hmm’!”

“I was hoping I could introduce you to them sometime soon.”

“Absolutely not!”

Itsuki shuddered. It started to sound like Nayuta was slowly removing all obstacles in her way.

“Well, ignoring that for the time being, it’s really true that I’ve got nowhere to go right now.”

“Can’t you just find a hotel like your mom and dad?”

“With you? In a hotel? Oh, that’d be great!”

“Dumbass! I’m saying, just go hole up in a hotel by yourself somewhere.”

“But staying in a hotel for two weeks would cost a lot of money, wouldn’t it?”

“Dude, you could afford to stay in a suite for two weeks! Hell, if you asked the guys at Editorial, they’d probably set up a room for you.”

Nayuta Kani was currently the biggest profit driver for her publisher. It was to the point where the presence, or lack thereof, of a new novel in her *Landscape* series had a major impact on the company’s end-of-year financial figures. If she wanted to lock herself in a room somewhere to focus on writing, her editors would no doubt start loading hotel websites that very instant.

“Yeah, but if I have my publisher pay for a hotel and all, that means I’ll have to start working and stuff, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t think so? It’s not like they’ll have a surveillance camera on you. Just say, like, ‘Well, I tried, but nothing really panned out’ or whatever.”

“Ahh, I see... Quite the sneaky one, aren’t you? But I don’t want to stay in a hotel by myself. It’s boring.”

“So just hang out at a twenty-four-hour manga café or—well, a girl spending multiple nights at a place like that probably isn’t a great idea, no...”

“Aww! You’re so kind to worry about me like that! I love you!”

“Shut up... I really think you should ask your editor for a room. If

you get bored, just have 'em get some books or games for you."

"*Ugghh!*" Now it was Nayuta who was about ready to lose her temper. "Look, I just want to have some reason for staying at your place! Get the picture already!"

"I have! That's why I'm trying to find some kind of reason to turn you down!"

"...And you said you'd do any favor I asked, too." Nayuta puffed out her cheeks.

"Mngh..." It might have been spur-of-the-moment, but Itsuki had said it. It made him hesitate.

"You realize I could've said 'please marry me' instead, right? But instead I'll just be satisfied with staying at your place a little while. You see? I don't think that's such a bad deal for you, is it, Itsuki?"

"...Mmmh..."

"Plus, who said anything about staying for free?"

"What...?"

Nayuta smiled at the dubious-looking Itsuki.

"If you let me stay here, I'll let you do anything you want with me. You can join me while I'm taking a bath all you like, or come into the bathroom when I'm taking a dump, or do dirty things to me while I'm sleeping. Or even when I'm not sleeping! It's all welcome, and I live my life strictly in the unrated director's-cut version! I don't care what you do, and I'll follow all of your orders, too. For example, I could take your cock and—"

"All *right!* Just two weeks, right?! Stay here for free, for all I care!"

"No, not free, I'm staying you can do dirty things to—"

"For *free!*" Itsuki sounded desperate as he raised his voice, cutting off the harried Nayuta. "Stay for free! I won't take a single thing from you!"

Not right now, he added internally to himself.

"Aw, you don't have to reject me like that... (´ω`)" The look on Nayuta's face seemed to indicate some slight disappointment, but she quickly smiled again. "Ee-hee-hee! I'm finally moving in with my boyfriend..."

"You're not 'moving in'! You're just staying for a bit!"

He knew there was no point shooting her down, but he still shouted the reply back, his face bright crimson.

SERIES INTRO

SISTERLY COMBAT

BY ITSUKI HASHIMA ART BY GURASHARA BORASU
FOUR VOLUMES ON SALE NOW.

■STORY

The "Blood Code"—the name given to the power to create miracles, driven by the souls shared evenly between brothers and sisters. Young Sieg has been raised from birth to become the strongest of Magic Knights, but he has steadfastly refused to harness the Blood Code with his sister Hilde. He instead becomes a Dark Knight to keep Hilde safe, carrying out the cruel orders of the Sorcerer Academy. What lies at the end of his battle...?

■CHARACTERS

Sieg

The seventeen-year-old child of the greatest current pair of Magic Knights. He was destined to join their ranks among the greats, but refused to harness the powers of his sister to wield the Blood Code, instead opting to become a Dark Knight and rely strictly upon his own soul to cast spells.

Hilde

Sieg's sister, younger by one year. A gentle-hearted girl, she has undertaken fifteen years of training to boost her magic force, all so she can become the best medium possible for Sieg's Blood Code. She herself is incapable of casting spells.

■STORY SETTING

Blood Code

The ability to cause supernatural phenomena by harnessing the souls of brothers and sisters linked by blood. Other types of magic rely on paring down one's own soul, placing an enormous strain on the caster, so the rise of the Blood Code has dramatically improved the stability and effects of the resulting magic. The brother or sister whose soul is harnessed for such magic will gradually be withered down until they become an invalid, even dying if further magic force is pulled from them beyond their limits.

Magic Knights

Those who follow the Sorcerer Academy's orders and fight to preserve order in the world. Near all of them are Blood Code masters.

The Sorcerer Academy

An organization that oversees the techniques behind magic. They are tasked with maintaining order in the world, ordering their Magic Knights to dispatch wizards or magical beasts who have dirtied their hands with forbidden spells.

Dark Knights

Knights who wield traditional magic, not relying on a sibling as their medium. Magic Knights who lose their sibling may choose this road if driven to continue their mission, but most of them die after failing to control their magic or die in battle since their lack of Blood Code skills makes them weak in combat.

Bride (?) Versus Brother (?)

Thus it came to pass that Nayuta would stay at Itsuki's place for a little bit. She already had a suitcase filled with clothes and toiletries in the room, humming to herself as she put her wardrobe in the closet and placed her toothbrush into the stand by the sink.

She grinned, taking a moment to admire the sight of her and Itsuki's toothbrushes lined up next to each other from multiple angles. Then she returned to the living room, smiling warmly as she stared at Itsuki. She was at the kotatsu table; he was by his desk, banging away at his novel. Or would be, if he didn't feel her eyes on him.

"...Could you not stare at me so much? You're breaking my focus."

"Are you working on *Sisterly Combat*, Volume Five?"

"Yeah."

"I'd like to read whatever you've done so far."

"...I'll print it out."

"Whoo-hoo!"

Itsuki turned on the printer and started the job. Nayuta's eyes sparkled as she hovered over it, grabbing each page the moment it was spat out. When it was done, she immediately sat back at the table and began reading.

It was more than pure love that drove Nayuta to stay so close to Itsuki. She was also a huge fan of Itsuki Hashima, the novelist. Reading his debut work during her stint as a shut-in dropout inspired her to write a novel and pursue a writing career of her own; she had since read all his subsequent work over many times. Itsuki had given her the chance to read works in progress before, but Nayuta—unlike his editor Toki, or Haruto and his sharp analytical skills—tended to give a thumbs-up to everything he did, so it never helped him very much. Getting complimented certainly did wonders for his mood and motivation, though, so it wasn't a waste of his time.

"Oooh... This is really killer stuff, this time! Hurry up and write more!"

After nearly an hour, Nayuta finished reading and began pumping Itsuki for more, like a dog begging for food. He appreciated the expected praise, but he was still blunt with her.

“Pfft... This isn’t something I can hurry, you know. Just shut up and wait. By the way, do you have your work stuff with you?”

The question popped into his mind. Nayuta had yet to do any work inside his place, but if she was going to be here for two weeks, he doubted she could get away with zero work progress during that time.

“Oh, yeah. I do, pretty much.”

Out from her suitcase came a flat, rectangular device, about the same size as a Nintendo 3DS XL. Opening it up revealed a display and a foldable keyboard, giving the impression of a rather tiny notebook PC. This was a Pomera, a portable device geared specifically for writing text, and it had none of the variety of apps you’d see on a PC or smartphone. It could save whatever you wrote in plaintext format, you could send the files to a PC, and that was it.

The Pomera was originally meant for situations like note-taking at business meetings, but being so stripped of features make it both a quick performer and very cheap. It also kept the user from being distracted by the Internet or gaming while trying to write, making it a popular gadget for novelists or game script writers. It only works with bare-bones text, however, so it isn’t too well-suited for novels that do a lot of fancy crap like this with their manuscripts or require further explanation for certain things¹.

“You write with a Pomera?” Itsuki asked, a bit surprised.

“Oh, I don’t care that much what I write on. I can write on a PC or a smartphone just fine, and sometimes I even write out longhand in a notebook. But having a keyboard makes it go faster, and this is really light and doesn’t get hot at all, so I can put it in my lap when I’m using it. It’s been the best fit for me out of anything so far.”

“...Nice how you’re able to write with any tool handy like that.”

It filled Itsuki with jealousy.

Every author had their own tool for writing. Even in the realm of personal computers, some people liked desktop PCs while others stuck with laptops. Others wrote on iPads and other tablets, while some people tapped away on their phones like they were texting. The old method of breaking out a pen and some writing paper was almost unheard of in the light novel industry, but a small group of diehards carried on with it in literary circles.

Itsuki went with a Let’s Note, a Japanese brand of notebooks released by Panasonic. It had a 12.1-inch screen and came equipped with Ichitaro, a word processor specially geared for the Japanese language and writing in Asian-style vertical text. He wrote his first novel on his dad’s old Let’s Note, which had the same screen size, and he had been selecting the same design footprint ever since. A creature of habit, he’d immediately start making typos whenever faced with a

keyboard sized differently, or with a slightly unfamiliar layout. It was his intention to stick with what he liked for the rest of his career.

“Well, anything works, really, tool-wise, but...”

Nayuta hesitated a bit. Itsuki took this to mean that she had a hang-up of a different sort.

“Do you, like, have to be out of the home to write?”

Just as with the tools, writers toiled in a wide number of environments. Some people wrote only in cafés or diners since there was too much to divert their attention at home, while others found it impossible to proceed if anyone was physically present nearby. There were writers who couldn’t work without music in the background, writers who needed a lit cigarette at the ready, writers who required coffee, writers who needed a chair, writers who needed a floor seat, and writers who needed to stand up. A bit of everything.

In contrast to his computer setup, Itsuki didn’t care much about the environment around him. Unless there was a sexy girl taking a shower right by him, he could work in his apartment, in a café, on the train—no place posed any major challenges.

“No, I don’t care where I am, really...but, well, I guess the location is important. Like, really...”

Itsuki turned a puzzled eye to this vague response.

“How do you mean?”

Nayuta’s cheeks flushed a bit.

“...I can’t write while I’m wearing any clothes.”

“Huhgh?”

Itsuki’s mind went blank, unable to follow the meaning of this. It just made Nayuta turn redder.

“I mean, I can’t write novels while I have clothes on.”

“What?!”

“And I can’t really explain why I can’t...but I’m always naked whenever I’m writing. Like, you know, being in the nude helps you focus more, right?”

“No, I don’t know that. Quit acting like that’s normal. I’ve never heard anything like that before,” Itsuki retorted, eyeing her with dismay.

“When I was just sitting in my room all day, mostly I played video games, but...for example, I might have a tough game I couldn’t beat clothed, but the moment I stripped, I was able to finish it. Usually I’m lucky if I can get through three loops of *Spelunker*, but naked I managed to go on for dozens of loops. And not just games, too. When I read naked, I can grasp the concepts behind what I read so much more easily.”

“...So you write naked, too?”

“Yeah. Writing novels takes tremendous concentration for me, so I can’t get anywhere with it unless I’m in the nude.”

“Hmm...”

This made little sense to Itsuki, given that he’d never tried it before, but it sounded pretty plausible to him. *Maybe it’s an actual thing*, he thought. Everyone had their own writing styles—it wouldn’t be weird to find a writer who couldn’t work while dressed.

“...I guess the location *would* be important, yeah.”

It would certainly eliminate the café and diner options, anyway.

“So what’re you gonna do about work while you’re staying here?”

Nayuta peered into Itsuki’s eyes.

“Itsuki...?”

“Wh-what...?”

“Is it okay if I work naked in here?”

“Of course not, you asshole,” he immediately responded.

“Come on!”

“Shut up!”

If she stripped naked in the same room, it’d affect Itsuki’s workflow a lot more than hers.

“...So do you hate naked women or something?”

“Yes! Except for little sisters!”

That’s what Itsuki claimed, but as a male, he was generally a fan of any attractive naked woman, sister or not. That applied to both the 2-D and 3-D world. A big-breasted beauty willing to wear her birthday suit would be an awesome, awesome experience. *How much is Kanikou going to wear down my defenses before she’s satisfied?* Itsuki thought, although he didn’t dare say it.

“Well, can I at least go without underwear?”

“Why is that okay?!”

“I don’t like feeling constrained. It makes me all jumpy. I’ll make sure to wear, you know, really baggy stuff.”

“You don’t like feeling constrained...?”

The statement reminded Itsuki of a dog or cat struggling to wriggle out of a piece of pet clothing.

“...Well, as long as you got clothes covering you, all right.”

As long as it wasn’t clear at a passing glance that she was undergarment-free, Itsuki figured it wouldn’t bother him much. The agreement came reluctantly, but it came nonetheless.



With permission to fling off her undies granted, Nayuta immediately

took off her clothes, tossed her bra and panties into the laundry hamper, and put on a large, roomy T-shirt that covered her entire body. She wore this as around-the-house gear all the time; it was big on her, but it was still just a T-shirt, so it didn't cover her thighs much. Some vigorous exercise, and you'd get a peek at her panties in short order. But as she wasn't wearing any, there was no fear of that.

She was excited about this, of course, sitting by the kotatsu and blurting out "I can't believe I'm wearing something so scandalous in Itsuki's house" to herself. If this had been a normal table, not a kotatsu, which had a duvet covering the sides, the lower part of her body would be totally visible. She wanted Itsuki to look—and get turned on. She wanted him to touch her legs, take off her clothes, get her all sweaty and messed up.

Blissfully unaware of these intense delusions, Itsuki kept working. Just then, the doorbell rang.

"...Hello."

"Hey."

A handsome, slightly androgynous young man in a windbreaker joined them in the room. This was Chihiro Hashima, Itsuki's stepbrother, and he had a bag from the grocery store in hand. The sight of Nayuta at the kotatsu made his face tense up.

"Hello, my future brother."

"I'm not your future brother... Hello, Ms. Kani."

With a bow, Chihiro placed his groceries in the refrigerator and began washing a knife and a cutting board.

"Are you making dinner?" Nayuta asked.

"That's right."

"Lemme help out, then, as his wife."

"You're not my wife, dumbass."

Itsuki's eyes remained on his screen. Nayuta stood up, ignoring him.

"Oh, no, there's really no need to—"

Chihiro froze midsentence as he noticed her choice of clothing.

"Wh-what kind of outfit is that, Ms. Kani?"

"Oooh... Maybe a little too provocative for a teenage boy like you?"

She grabbed her shirt at the hem, making it billow as Chihiro blushed hard.

"Kn-knock it off!"

"Could you stop sexually harassing my brother, please?!" As Chihiro looked away, Itsuki scolded Nayuta with his eyes on the screen to ensure she didn't enter his visual range.

Nayuta smiled villainously at Chihiro. "Hee-hee-hee! My body is Itsuki's and Itsuki's alone, but you can feel free to serve me up when

you need...inspiration."

"Inspiration?"

"I mean fap material."

"What's...fap material?" came the blank reply. It made Nayuta redden, for a change.

"...How is this boy so pure-hearted? I'm starting to think I'm the dirtiest girl around..."

She slinked back to the kotatsu, ashamed of herself, as Chihiro gave her a confused look.

"...? Um, hey, bro, what's fap material?"

"Huh?! I, um..."

As Itsuki floundered, Chihiro continued, befuddled. "If she said 'serve me up,' does she mean food? Do *you* like getting served up fap material, too?"

"Well, erm, I suppose I'd always be open to it, I guess." Itsuki blushed.

"Huh... So you like this fap material?"

"Well, ummmmmm... It depends?"

"Oh. So there's different types of it?"

"Yeah, um... Lots."

Little-sister themed, big-breast themed, shrine-priestess themed, student-council-president themed. You name it.

"Ohh. Neat. Well, when I get around to serving that up, I'll make sure to pick some good stuff."

"S-sure..."

Hearing his younger brother speak so earnestly about fap material and the like made Itsuki feel like he was a corrupting influence.

"So how do you eat fap material, anyway?"

".....Well, maybe it's best if you research that yourself— Wait, don't! Don't!"

"Huh?"

Imagining the shock at being exposed to the Internet search results made Itsuki correct himself.

"Look, so... When the right, uh, time comes for you to know, I'll tell you myself, so... Don't go looking on the net about it, all right? No matter what."

"All right. I'll look forward to that."

As Itsuki gravely explained, Chihiro gave him a smile and began working on dinner.

"When's the right time for someone to learn about dirty words?" Nayuta whispered.



“...I don’t know,” Itsuki whispered back.

“And didn’t your family ever give him any sex education?”

“Yeah... I’m a little worried about that, too.”

When Itsuki was in high school, he was absorbing all kinds of obscene words and concepts. Nobody had to go out of their way to tell him about it all. Maybe all Chihiro knew was the stuff they taught him in health class.

...Though, given what he knew about Chihiro’s mother, that would come as a bit of a surprise.



After the three of them finished dinner, Chihiro went to check on the laundry once he finished washing the dishes.

Itsuki occasionally did the laundry himself, but he tended to just toss everything in the same load—sweaters, patterned clothes, it didn’t matter—dump a random amount of detergent inside, press a bunch of buttons, then leave it in there for days after forgetting about it. Chihiro, as a result, had to check on him regularly and do the wash for him once it piled up. There were several days’ worth of clothing in the hamper right now.

“Man, my brother never learns,” Chihiro said to himself, smiling a bit as he saw what was inside. Then:

“Huh...? Whoa...!”

He went silent, picking up the casually tossed women’s underwear—a white bra with a bit of modest embroidery on it, and a pair of panties that were little more than a couple of strings sewn together. They were both lacy, racy, and see-through.

“Um, b-b-bro?!”

He walked right away from the washing machine, red as a beet as he carried the underwear with him.

“Wh-what?” the surprised Itsuki asked.

“Th-this! What’s this?”

“Oh, that’s my undies,” Nayuta blithely replied. “Did you want them?”

“No thank you!” Chihiro shouted. “Wh-why is Ms. Kani’s underwear in the laundry hamper?!”

“I took them off.”

“Huh...?! Why did you take your underwear off in this apartment?!”

Nayuta cupped both hands around her mouth. “Oooh, you shouldn’t ask something like that. It’s so embarrassing!”

“Were you doing something embarrassing?!”

“Tee-hee... I’ll leave that to my future little brother’s imagination.”

“Will you stop acting so goddamn suggestive?!” Itsuki chimed in. “Here’s the deal. So, umm...”

Then he explained to Chihiro that Nayuta would be staying over for about two weeks, omitting the part about his Frieza imitation in front of the bathroom mirror.

“Wow... Two whole weeks with her...?”

It came as a clear shock to Chihiro. He took a deep breath and timidly asked, “Um, you and Ms. Kani... Are...are you kind of an item now?”

“Yes!”

“No, we’re not!”

Nayuta’s reply was as immediate as it was serious. Itsuki had to quickly step in to deny it.

Chihiro turned a judgmental eye to Itsuki. “...Why would you live together with a girl if you aren’t in a relationship with her?”

“W-we’re not living together! I’m just letting her crash for a little bit! It’s kind of, like...you know, like I’m pet-sitting for someone!”

Nayuta immediately curled her index fingers above her temples, imitating a cat’s ears. “Mee-yow! That’s right; I’m your purr-fect little pet!”

“W-will you shut *up*?!”

The sudden, unexpected outburst of cuteness made Itsuki panic. It also did nothing to convince Chihiro about his brother’s intentions.

“Look, bro, you can’t do this! You just can’t! I—I just don’t think it’s the right thing to do! You can’t!”

“Mmh...”

Itsuki fully understood that inviting a non-girlfriend to his place to stay for two weeks wasn’t exactly normal behavior. He had tried to dodge it as much as he could. But having the decision so flatly rejected like this made him want to rebel a bit.

“...Why do *you* have any say in it?”

“Huh?”

The slightly peeved tone of Itsuki’s voice made Chihiro freeze, as if in shock.

“I’m free to have anyone I want stay here, aren’t I? It’s not like I’m causing trouble for anyone.”

“B-but you can’t! Like...it might lead to some kind of mistake...”

“Oof...”

It *was* a concern of Itsuki’s. A single night was one thing, but he wasn’t too sure having this girl around all hours of the day was something he could withstand.

"The most wonderful kind of mistake!" Nayuta purred. Itsuki ignored her.

"I'm sure both of our dads would be worried about it, too..."

Chihiro's sudden protest made Itsuki wince a bit. "So what?" he said. "We can worry about it if it comes up."

"...Yeah?"

"Look, I'm a grown man. I'm doing relatively okay with my career; I'm paying my taxes and everything. I think I can take responsibility for myself, you know?"

"Y-yeah, but...!"

"Mwah-ha-ha. Just give it up, my future in-law!" Nayuta interjected. "Whatever a grown man and a grown woman get up to, it's not going to be a problem for anyone else."

"Well, maybe not, but...mmmhh..."

"Um, Chihiro...?"

Itsuki was suddenly alarmed by Chihiro, who looked ready to burst into tears. His little brother gave him a long, firm look.

"...But that assumes you two are *mentally* grown up! Which you aren't!"

"Huh?"

"Wh-what?"

"I mean, okay, maybe you've got some money saved up! But you can't cook, you can't clean; you can't do the laundry! You dress like slobs, you spend entire days without leaving the apartment, you go on vacations on a total whim, you're drinking beer in the middle of a weekday afternoon, you can't keep a steady schedule to save your lives, and all you do is screw around until you have to crunch to meet a deadline... I really wouldn't call that 'grown up,' you know!"

"Oof..."

Itsuki had nothing to refute that assessment with. It was absolutely correct.

"Mmm..."

Nayuta, for her part, also hated chores and was even less capable of caring for herself than Itsuki. It made her feel a twinge of regret.

"I'm just saying, Itsuki, as your younger brother, I can't just sit here and watch you get even worse! So you two can't live together!"

Itsuki caved under the pressure of Chihiro's final pronouncement.

"...Well, you heard him, Kanikou. I guess I can't have you here."

"...Oh, all right," responded a clearly peeved Nayuta. "I don't want my future brother-in-law to resent me right from the outset, so I'll just take my leave."

Then she took out her phone and called her editor, asking for a

hotel room for two weeks so she could have a “writer’s retreat.” They immediately reserved one near the station for her.

And so, by the narrowest of margins, Itsuki and Nayuta didn’t have to shack up after all.



Once the other two left, Itsuki went back to work. Hilde still needed to confess her love for Sieg, and he still needed to accept her—as his sister, and as a woman. Now, without any naked mirror theatrics, he thought he was ready to write this rather important scene.

“...I am a Dark Knight. I’ve walked the line between life and death more than a few times. I’ve mastered the art of the Hellpyre sword, and I can stand up and defend my own actions.”

Though his words were cold, Hilde replied, “Of course, my brother. I’m sure you’re just as powerful as you say you are! But you can’t cook, and you pay hardly any attention to your clothes! You go running off into battle on a moment’s notice—you never come back home, always fighting in that Dark World, bereft of day or night... Do you have any idea how helpless I feel, waiting for you? As a person, Sieg, you’re just no good at all!”

“Ngh...”

Sieg felt himself falter at this telling blow.

“Seeing you hurt yourself like this... As your younger sister, I just can’t—no. As the girl who loves you, I can’t just sit here and watch that happen...!”

With that, Hilde tossed away the milky-white dress that covered her...

To Hilde, Sieg was no noble Dark Knight, no grand hero who saved the lives of thousands. She saw him for what he was—just a guy, and nothing more.

“Whew...”

It was a really nice scene, Itsuki thought. This was one of the biggest climaxes in the whole *Sisterly Combat* series, and he thought the writing lived up to it. He was satisfied.

If there was only one issue to bring up:

“Man, if Chihiro reads this, I’m gonna die from how awkward it’ll get...”

ITSUKI—NAYUTA—HARUTO—SETSUNA

Preferred Work Tools & Environments

ITSUKI

Let's Note (Panasonic) laptop, Ichitaro word processing software. He can generally write anywhere, from home to a café, a diner, a karaoke room, or on the Shinkansen train—just as long as no nude women are nearby.



NAYUTA

Any writing device is fine: PC, smartphone, game console, even a pen and notebook. She also works well in any environment, with one rather limiting prerequisite—it has to be someplace where it's okay to be naked.



HARUTO

A MacBook when outside the house, supplemented with a tablet for occasional plot outlines and notes. At home, he uses a self-built PC he's named *Première*—a “cold, blunt woman, but an obedient maid nonetheless,” as Haruto describes her. He mainly works at a Starbucks or a fancier café, not to mention home or at Itsuki's place.



SETSUNA

Not one to keep up on the latest tech, Setsuna still uses the first drawing tablet and painting software he bought, although he can produce the same art quality with a mouse. No work environment is off-limits to him; his “studio” is wherever the muse strikes him. Lucky bastard.



Nayuta Kani, Hard at Work

It was the evening of Nayuta Kani's third day at the hotel her publisher's editorial department set up for her. Miyako Shirakawa was paying a visit after Nayuta had invited her over for some dinner.

This was a "business-plus" room inside a hotel about a five-minute walk from the nearest rail station. Whenever a writer requested (or was forced into) an isolated room to focus on a deadline or other issue, this was usually where the publisher put them.

As hotels go, it was a notch below five-star but not by a long distance. The kinds of rooms publishers reserved for such things was said to represent the company's position in the industry; Nayuta's was a solid performer in the light novel market, certainly, and her hotel room reflected that. If she worked for a real first-class industry leader like Shogakukan Gagaga Bunko, she could've expected a swanky penthouse suite [*Not true.—Editor*].

This service wasn't provided to just any writer, though. It was reserved for the big guns, the novelists who would impact finances for the whole year depending on whether they produced a new book or not. Writers who didn't fall into that category would be brushed away—"Garbage like you should know that they don't deserve the ritzy hotel life on the publisher's dime! You wanna hole up in a room, we got the perfect spot for you!"—and tossed into a basement cell under the editorial office, equipped with a desk, a sleeping bag, and a camping toilet. There, they would live out the rest of their natural lives or until they had a manuscript to submit.

Miyako, wholly ignorant of all this, was impressed. *The publisher gives them a hotel to live in? Writers sure have it pretty good!* she marveled as she walked past the fairly fancy front desk and stepped into the fairly fancy elevator.

In another moment, she was down the fairly fancy hallway and knocking on a fairly fancy door. They had stayed in a cramped low-budget hotel during their Okinawa trip a while back, and during her high school class trip they all piled into a bare-bones Japanese-style *ryokan*, so even less-than-five-star was an unfamiliar world to a college student like her. It made her nervous.

"...?"

Several knocks in a row produced no response. Checking the room number one more time, she tried again. Nothing.

“Nayu? It’s me!” she called, knocking a bit more loudly. After a while, there was a click and Nayuta popped out from the door—completely naked.

“Oh, hey, Myaa; c’mon in.”

“Huh?! Um, okay,” Miyako said as she hurried inside. “Nayu! Why aren’t you wearing anything?!”

“I was in the middle of work,” Nayuta reported.

“Oh... Wait, so what does that have to do with it?! Why’re you naked?!”

“Didn’t Itsuki tell you? I can’t write novels unless I’m in the nude.”

“Huh?!”

Miyako’s look of horror indicated she had no idea what this was about. Nayuta pouted, frowning at her.

“It’s thanks to this curse that I can’t live with Itsuki right now... and there’s nothing else to do in here, so I’m working.”

“Oh...okay...”

She was aware that Nayuta wasn’t exactly normal, and she also knew that Nayuta loved finding any credible excuse to take off her clothes. She didn’t comprehend any of it, no, but Miyako decided Nayuta probably wasn’t making this up.

“I’ll get to the end of this part I’m working on in a moment, so could you give me just a little bit more time?”

“Um, sure...”

The naked Nayuta stretched her legs out in the middle of the double bed, placed her Pomera in the space between her knees, hunched in front of the keyboard, and pecked away. Her face was resolute, serious, nothing like the spaced-out look she usually sported. Combined with the lack of clothing on her, it formed the basis for a work of fine art. Now Miyako understood why knocking didn’t do anything. The level of focus was obvious even to an external observer.

So this is how Nayuta works...

Miyako stood there for a while, taking in the sight. The only sound that echoed in the room was the brisk noise of the keyboard—and then, out of the blue, Nayuta stopped and looked at her friend.

“Myaa!”

“Oh, sorry if I broke your concentration.”

“Huh? No, not really. But I wanted to ask...”

“Sure, what?”

“Let me fondle your boobs for a second.”

Nayuta stared solemnly at her.

“Whaat? Wh-why?!”

“I’m writing this scene where boobs are being fondled, so I wanted some reference.”

Miyako’s face instantly reddened. “N-no way! Plus, don’t you have your own? Like...way more impressive than mine...?”

Nayuta took that cue to immediately start rubbing and kneading her own breasts. “Mine are too jiggly. It’s not the right feel for the character on the receiving end in this. But yours are just right, Myaa.”

“Oh...”



Miyako approached Nayuta, still looking incredulous.

“...Well, go ahead. Have at it.”

“Oh, um, not with your clothes on. Au naturel.”

“Au naturel?! That... That’s, like, not allowed, even!”

“Please, Myaa?”

Nayuta never looked more earnestly serious in her life.

Those blue eyes, betraying not a grain of ill intent, bored into Miyako, making her reconsider. They were both women; they had both gone to the public bathhouse together. Plus, Nayuta was nude already. Maybe a little hands-on wasn’t any kind of big deal after all. That—and considering how many readers Nayuta had and how much she had to care for all of them, there were likely hundreds—maybe even thousands of people out there willing to do anything to help Nayuta Kani with her novels.

Perhaps Miyako had no great talent, but now, she was being asked to help Nayuta with her work over several hundred thousand of her readers. And she hated to admit it, but it filled her with a masochistic sense of ecstasy.

Face red, she murmured, “O-okay... Fondle away, then...”

“Thank you so much!” Nayuta smiled broadly.

“Well...let me get this off...”

Steeling her resolve, she tossed off her top, followed quickly by her bra.

“I like how you just whip it off, Myaa.”

“...Look, just for a little bit, all right? And not too rough, either!”

Miyako straightened up, chest out, hiding the nerves that were making her tremble.

“Right. Here we go.”

She grabbed both of Miyako’s breasts at the same time, hard, and began violently massaging them this way and that.

“Nh...!”

Greeted by the unfamiliar sensation of having her breasts handled by someone else, Miyako kept herself from speaking out loud as she looked at Nayuta. The novelist was experimenting, adjusting her force and prodding from assorted angles, sometimes just pushing down with a flat palm. Then, she nodded to herself.

“Hmm... All right. I think I understand.”

And then she went back to writing.

“You understood what...?”

The confused Miyako, still topless, looked down at Nayuta. She was back in a trancelike state, tapping away at the keyboard—but after a couple of minutes, she stopped.

“Whewwww,” she sighed deeply, her reddened cheeks giving her

a bit of a coquettish look.

“N-Nayu...? Are you done?” Miyako timidly asked.

Her friend burst into a contented smile. “Um, yeah. I’m finished describing the boobs part of it. It turned out really great, I think, so thanks, Myaa.”

“Yeah...? Well, great. But...the boobs *part*?”

Miyako had a bad feeling about what Nayuta would say next.

“Next up is your butt.”

“Y-you’re *really* going too far now! I’m not going to show *that* to you!”

“Please. You’re the only one I can turn to for this, Myaa. Please let me fondle your ass.”

“Ugh...”

It was hard to resist when Nayuta asked like that.

“Do...do you want that *au naturel*, too...?”

“...Would that be bad? Can you do *au naturel*...?”

Nayuta looked at her like an abandoned kitten.

“Uggghhh... Just this once, all right?!”

And so Miyako undid her skirt and shorts.

“All right! See?”

Nayuta stared intently at the lower half of Miyako’s body, almost wholly naked.

“...Myaa, if we’re going this far, we might as well go all the way. Can you take off your socks?”

“What d’you mean, ‘might as well’?!”

Miyako was greeted with a quizzical look from Nayuta. “No, I mean... Being totally naked except for your socks? It just feels like a halfhearted effort. It’s gross.”

“...Oh, right, you were a fan of Itsuki’s books, weren’t you...?”

Whenever characters in Itsuki’s books went naked, they always went 100 percent of the way. Off went their socks, their gloves, and any other equipment they might’ve had on. Miyako pointed it out to him once, remarking that he could at least leave the socks on, but he had been seriously adamant on this point: “No, that’d be superfluous... Actually, it’d be downright barbaric. Like drowning a grade-A steak in sugary syrup.”

Occasionally this would earn Itsuki criticism on the net, with reviewers writing things like “This author doesn’t understand the concept of fetishism at all.” It made him fly into a rage every time: “These people don’t understand what being fully nude truly means! Being fully nude means being *fully* nude! The complete picture, with nothing left missing! The concept of ‘fully nude’ while wearing socks

or gloves cannot logically exist! These idiots need go to back to kindergarten and figure out how language works, goddammit!!”

“So what about nude except for a hairband?” Miyako then asked.

“Oh, that’s fine,” he replied.

“How is that different?”

“Um... When it comes to 2-D characters...if you change their hairstyles, it gets hard to tell them apart a lot of the time...,” he had shamefully admitted.

“You writers really *are* a bunch of sex-obsessed crazies, aren’t you...?”

Back in the present, Miyako had just removed her shoes and thigh-highs, making her fully nude for the first time.

“Here I go, then,” the equally nude Nayuta said as she grabbed at her rear end and wordlessly started to feel it up. This time, there wasn’t that weird pleasant feeling Miyako felt with the breast attention—just a bare realization that *Hmm, yeah, someone’s bouncing my ass around.*

What am I even doing...?

Having her rear end groped and prodded was beginning to raise serious questions in Miyako’s mind about her life.

After around half a minute of this simulated molestation:

“.....Hmmm...”

It ended, much more quickly than the breast workout.

“...?”

Is she done? Miyako wondered, puzzled.

“...I guess I didn’t need the butt after all,” Nayuta whispered, her voice frigid.

“Didn’t need it? You stripped me naked...!”

“Oh, no, I didn’t mean I had any complaints about your ass, Myaa. It just didn’t feel all that different from me groping my own ass, so I guess I didn’t need to do research on you, too, is all.”

“Oh...”

Miyako wouldn’t have known. She hadn’t engaged in comparative ass-groping so far in her life.

“Oh, well. Hey, Myaa...”

“...?”

Nayuta’s eyes turned elsewhere, as did her hands.

“Oof!”

“...Angh?!”

Suddenly, she began touching Miyako’s legs.

“Ooooh... Look at this...!”

“Wh-whoa! What are you doing, Nayu?!”

“Your legs sure are pretty, Myaa. They’re so thin, but healthy, too. All bursting with energy but no extra meat on them. Do you play some

kind of sport?"

"...Well, sort of, yeah."

"What do you do?" Nayuta asked, briskly petting Miyako's legs. It made her restless. She wanted to make noise, but she resisted.

"Anh... U-umm, I did karate as a kid, up to age fourteen, and then I played tennis...*nh*...and then basketball in high school."

"Wow. Pretty athletic girl, huh?"

"...I wasn't really good at any of it," Miyako said with a self-deprecating smile. She had been pretty passionate about the karate she'd learned, starting in elementary school. Her sensei said she had a talent for it, so she kept it up in middle school, but she quit after the friends in her clique said a girl who did karate would seem too violent to be popular. So she followed them to the tennis club—she didn't care *that* much about being popular, but getting kicked out of their little group scared her. Then, when she went into high school and got a new set of friends, she was invited into the basketball club by some fellow beginners.

She had always been fast on her feet, so both tennis and basketball came naturally to some extent, but never up to the level of someone who dedicated themselves fully to it. Whenever she went to a tournament, it'd be full of people even better than the best people in her school. So she gave up on that, reasoning that reaching their level would be impossible for her. Instead, she just sweated it out with her own friends, having a decent enough time at it.

And it wasn't that she regretted her choice. But she couldn't but think every now and then about what she'd be like right now if she listened to her sensei and didn't quit karate all that time ago. Maybe she'd be a full-fledged athlete by now, appearing in national tournaments. Or maybe she'd have given up the moment she faced an opponent with more talent and ability than her.

...Or, faced with that disadvantage in talent and ability, maybe she would've kept moving forward, unwilling to give up.

Miyako had no way of telling now, so she had no way of understanding Itsuki, either. He was surrounded by dozens of authors with more talent, ability, and profit-making skills than him, but as a professional writer, he never threw in the towel. It was hard for Miyako to imagine what kind of heart that took.

What am I even doing...? Miyako thought again.

"...Hyah?!"

She was brought back down to earth by Nayuta, who had gotten out of bed in order to walk up to Miyako and lightly nibble at one of her nipples.

"Wh-what're you...? What're you doing?!"

"You looked kind of down, so..."

“...I was just thinking about something for a second. Don’t worry about it. And how does looking kind of down connect to biting my nipples...?”

She tried to change the subject, realizing that her face was starting to feel hot.

“All right, Myaa, can you lie down on the bed for a second?”

“...?”

Miyako did what she was told, relaxing on her back. It was comfortable, much softer than the bed from that Okinawa hotel.

“Is this good?”

“Yeah.” Nayuta nodded, before jumping on top of her.

“Wh-whoa?! What’re...?!”

Miyako struggled as she felt herself being pushed into the bed. Nayuta’s ample breasts took up most of her vision. “*Mee-yow*,” she sweetly cried as she got even closer.

Legs, stomachs, hips, arms, breasts—flushed skin touched against flushed skin as they basked in each other’s temperature. To Miyako, it felt almost like she and Nayuta were melting into the same consciousness. She began to wonder—if just connecting body to body made her like this, what would happen if they were more deeply connected? It made every part of her ache.

“Nha...nn...!”

“Ah, I see, so this is how it feels...”

Even as Miyako started to lose her breath, Nayuta remained perfectly calm, as if on the edge of a great discovery.

“Okay, could you go on top of me next, Myaa?”

She removed herself from Miyako and lay down on her back. “Come on,” she said, spreading both arms wide to invite her in.

“M-me...?”

She took the invite, willing to do just about anything now as she went on top of Nayuta.

“Aha... This really does make your heart speed up.”

Nayuta observed the blushing Miyako’s body.

Being studied like this was embarrassing for Miyako, so she brought her face as close to Nayuta’s as she could. Her friend’s beautiful eyes, pale skin, and moist lips were right before her eyes. Just another couple inches, and their lips would be touching. What did someone else’s lips feel like...?

“Um, Myaa...”

Nayuta moved her head back, a bit bashfully.

“No kissing, um... It’d be my first, so...”

“I’m not! I’m not kissing!” Miyako stammered as pulled her head back. “...Hey, this is a situation you need for your novel, right? Don’t middle schoolers read those? It’s kind of too graphic for them, isn’t

it?”

“This isn’t for that, no.”

“Huh?”

Nayuta gave a bashful, but cute smile. “This is just a simulation for whenever I get to have sex with Itsuki.”

“...! Don’t use me for *that*!”

Miyako practically shot out of the bed.

Nayuta sat up and started fidgeting with embarrassment.

“Aw, but Myaa, you’ve got so much experience, and I’m still a virgin, so whenever Itsuki decides to push me into bed, I don’t know if I could keep from going crazy.”

“...I swear...”

Miyako sighed.

Here was this girl, bewitching thousands of readers with her overwhelming story talents, stirring up the emotions of Itsuki and so many other, less gifted people around her (Miyako and friends included), but she still sometimes acted like a totally sheltered little girl. It was so cute, she could hardly stand it. Maybe, she thought, this was why the little-sister trope was so popular.

You really wanted to give a girl like this something. Not because Miyako felt inferior to Nayuta, but because she had a real, pure fondness for her. Or so she wanted to believe.

“Myaa, how was it when you had sex for the first time?”

“Wehh?! M-me?!”

“Yeah,” the curious Nayuta asked her flustered friend.

“W-well... I mean, the first time, I was really nervous...but, you know, things kept going along, and it turned out okay, I guess?”

“Oooh... That’s how it works out, huh...?”

“Yeah, um, you’ll know what I mean when it happens to you, Nayu...heh... Ha-ha-ha...”

“I see. Fascinating.”

Nayuta gave the borderline-incoherent Miyako a look of sincere respect. It only made Miyako feel guiltier.

The Art of E-mailing Excuses

It took about five days to finish up the tricky Hilde love-confession scene. Overcoming that as well as a few other turning points in the story, Volume 5 of *Sisterly Combat* was finally approaching the endgame. It was trying for Itsuki, who was breaking into a cold sweat as he all but wrung every word of it out from his brain.

He was seated not at his desk, but in a private room in a karaoke place right now, two train stops away. He was alone with Miyako; she had shown up just when he was leaving his apartment. He'd said he was going to karaoke, and she agreed to come along.

Once they were guided to a room, Itsuki took out his notebook PC, plugged it in, set the karaoke sound system's volume to zero, and started to write.

"Wait, we aren't singing?"

Itsuki gave his surprised friend a disbelieving look.

"...What do you think I came here for?"

"Um, not for karaoke?!"

"For work. It's got an electrical outlet, I can order food and drinks, it's a private room so I don't have to worry about other people, I can sing something if I need a distraction... It's the perfect workplace."

"Ohhh." Miyako nodded. It made sense to her. "Well, now that I'm here, though, what should I be doing?"

"Mm? I dunno."

"Itsuki..."

Itsuki rolled his eyes at the sullen Miyako and handed an iPad Mini over to her. "You can kill some time with this. I got a bunch of e-books in there."

"Oh... Okay. Thanks."

Miyako grabbed it, still a bit dubious, and opened the Kindle app on it. She was greeted with a barrage of novel and manga covers; more than enough to pass the time.

Not sure where to begin, she searched for titles with the word "sister" in it. It resulted in quite a number of comics and novels: *Oreimo*, *Himouto! Umaru-chan*, *The Testament of Sister New Devil*, *Ani-Imo*, *A Sister Is a Wonderful Thing*, *Slippery Sister*, *Love Thy Sister!*, *My Sister Became a Hero*, *My Sister Is an American?!*, *Nakaimo—My Sister Is*

Among Them!, etc.

How much sister stuff does this guy buy? Miyako resignedly thought. In a way, it was even more of a shock that there was this whole world of little-sister media that went beyond Itsuki. *Do that many people go for this stuff?*

She closed the results page and searched with some non-sister-oriented keywords... Hmm. *The Irregular at Magic High School* was supposed to be really popular. The term “irregular” also caught her attention. She decided to start reading, and just as she tapped on the title:

Vrrrr!

Suddenly, the phone Itsuki had put on the table began to vibrate and play a blaring ringtone. Itsuki reared back a bit but kept looking at his PC, not bothering to pick it up.

“...You aren’t taking that? It says ‘Kenjiro Toki’ on the screen... That’s your editor, isn’t it?” Miyako asked over the clattering vibration.

“...It’s fine,” he said with a nod. It clearly wasn’t. A bead of sweat ran down one cheek.

“...Itsuki, are you trying to avoid your editor?”

Itsuki’s shoulders twitched violently. “Ha... Ha-ha-ha, d-don’t be silly! Whatever makes you think that...?”

“...Well, you usually work at home, but today we’re sitting in this karaoke room. There are at least a couple of karaoke joints closer to you that I know of, but you spent money on a train to one farther out. The publisher’s office is right by your place, right? You went here to keep your editor from visiting you at home, didn’t you?”

“...Ugh. Your detective skills are perfect.” Itsuki reluctantly nodded.

“Is your deadline that big of a deal?”

Itsuki brazenly snorted at her. “Listen, Miyako. There are two types of deadlines in this world.”

“Two?”

“There’s the **pseudo-deadline**, which you can get away with breaking. Then there’s the **Real Deadline**. If you break that, then the book launch gets delayed, they don’t publish serial excerpts in the magazines, and you get in some serious shit.”

As Itsuki explained in his best I’m-so-smart voice, Miyako asked, “So which one are you about to break? The pseudo one, or the real one?”

“...The real one,” he groaned like a zombie.

“That’s...kind of bad, isn’t it?”

“Yep.”

Typically, the first deadline an editor gives to their writer is a

placeholder of sorts, one that allows for plenty of schedule adjustment if need be. All writers, upon making their pro debuts, try their best to follow these pseudo-deadlines, but as they build experience, they learn over time that these “deadlines” are surprisingly elastic. Later, once they spend more time in the frontline trenches of novel writing and start interacting with other authors and people in the publishing business, they gain a grasp of the schedule leading up to actual publication, allowing them to calculate when the holy-shit, oh-my-god Real Deadline is.

With three years of professional writing under his belt, Itsuki Hashima had a vague but fairly decent grasp of when this Real Deadline was. He had the experience to predict how much more text he had to produce before his manuscript was done, as well as how much time that’d take assuming things proceeded well. And now, his instincts were telling him:

—This manuscript probably ain’t gonna make the Real Deadline.

He had broken five-ish pseudo-deadlines in a row, and yesterday was the last one of those. There was no more “pseudo-” in front of the next deadline. He breaks it, there’s no book. And unlike other publishers in the field, who could keep the money flowing in with weekly magazines and the like, Itsuki’s couldn’t make up for the time loss.

Toki had been calling his phone practically nonstop since last night, pressing him for the manuscript. Itsuki had pressed on with his writing, steadfastly ignoring the calls. But, realizing he was in an impossible situation, he had finally decided to flee his own home and disappear before Toki came to his doorstep.

“...Well, hang in there.”

With that little show of support, Miyako went back to reading.

The sweat poured down Itsuki’s head as his fingers slammed away at the keyboard for an hour or so. Suddenly:

“...All right!”

He stopped, turned his head upward, and gave Miyako a broad, refreshing smile.

“You’re done?!”

Itsuki kept smiling.

“Time to sing!”

“What?! You got time for that?”

He didn’t. He didn’t, but Itsuki sang—to switch gears for bit, and/or to escape reality. He went on for about an hour straight, jumping between anime themes and his favorite bands. After he had worked up

a good sweat, his face suddenly turned dour again.

“Right... Time to start fighting again... Fighting reality...”

“Huh? Um, okay... That’d be good, I think.”

Miyako wasn’t exactly being helpful, delving back into her novel as the solo recital of utter desperation continued. She had her doubts about how “irregular” the hero of this story was, but she still liked it a lot.

Turning back toward his PC, Itsuki opened up a new e-mail window instead of his manuscript.

“Okay... What kind of excuse will my editor be okay with...?”

“Huh?! You aren’t writing the novel?”

“Bah-ha-ha! You fool! I would be, if I had any chance of making it in time! But there’s just no way, so I’m gonna send an e-mail with an excuse so good, he’ll have to accept that I couldn’t avoid this!”

“...Well, if you think that’s your best option, have at it, I guess.”

Ignoring the bile behind Miyako’s advice, Itsuki started thinking. The most orthodox approach would be to meekly apologize and beg for some way to make an extension.

Hello. This is Hashima. Thanks as always for your support.

I regret to inform you that, unfortunately, I am unable to see a way that I will be able to have Volume 5 of *Sisterly Combat* done by our agreed-upon date. Would it be possible for you to give me just two more days on this?

Again, I’m very sorry about this.

“That oughtta work, no?” said Miyako as she looked at the screen.

Itsuki shook his head. “Not at all.”

“Why not?”

“Because if I fully admit this is my fault, that asshole editor’s gonna ream me out for it and I’ll have no right to whine about it. I’d feel like crap sending this already, but then he’d just lay it on even more in person and make me feel worse. It’d be stupid.”

“...Well, it is kind of your fault, though, isn’t it?”

“No!”

He hit his fist on the table.

“Um, ‘no’ how?”

“Listen, the whole reason why I’m in so much trouble with Volume Five is because it’s packed with a bunch of hard-to-write scenes. Some of the most important stuff in the entire series; stuff that readers have been salivating for this whole time.”

“Mm-hmm...”

“Let’s say that I skip some of these scenes for the sake of my deadline. You think the readers would accept that once they’re done with this volume? Of course not.”

“...Yeah, maybe not.”

“*Totally* not. And those readers would be pissed off at me, of

course, but they'd also be pissed off at my editor and the publisher for being so strict with their deadline policy. It'd wreck their confidence in the entire company. They'd stop buying *Sisterly Combat*, and the rest of my books, and even the rest of other people's series. They'd lose money, their stock price would go down, the joint would go out of business, and the editors would be out on the street! Bah-ha-ha! Take *that*, bastards!"

"...Is your publisher listed in the stock market?"

There were other things Miyako could have pointed out, but she decided to go with that question first.

"No, but... Look, don't nitpick."

"Sorry."

Itsuki cleared his throat, gathering his thoughts. "Anyway! Me being *forced, against my will*, to break this deadline is my way of protecting the honor of my publisher and the paychecks of my editors. So why should I have to apologize to my editor and be raked over the coals for that? It's not fair! In fact, I should be *praised* for doing the right thing for everyone and busting through this deadline!"

"You think so...?"

Itsuki ignored his wholly unconvinced karaoke partner.

"So let's try writing an e-mail based on that."

Hello. This is Hashima. Thanks as always for your support.

Regarding Volume 5 of *Sisterly Combat*, which I was planning to send you yesterday, boosting the quality of the final manuscript is taking an unexpectedly long amount of time.

It was possible, of course, to prioritize my deadline and produce the final novel within the assigned period, but as you are aware, Volume 5 is one of the most important in the entire saga, a major turning point for the series. Publishing such a vital volume when the quality isn't where it needs to be will almost certainly invite the ire of our readers—and it would also affect the reputation of the publisher, the tradition and achievements of the editorial team, and your very name as an erudite editor, Mr. Toki.

In order to avoid this impending disaster, it pains me to take two more days to brush up the manuscript, but I regrettably find that I must. Thank you in advance for your understanding.

"...Wow," Miyako whispered to herself as she read it.

"Heh-heh-heh... Right?"

"...The way you totally brush off all responsibility and make it sound like it's for their sake is honestly breathtaking, in a way."

"Heh..."

"...If I was your editor, I'd probably kick your ass."

Itsuki began to sweat a bit. "...So it'd *kind* of piss him off?"

"Not 'kind of,' I don't think. You missed this deadline, but here you are, writing this like you're Big King Novelist. Not only do you avoid apologizing at all; you go on to extend the deadline without even asking—it pains me to take two more days to brush up the manuscript? I mean, who do you think you are...?"

"Um..."

“Also, it’s too long. He’ll probably think, like, ‘If you got time to write this, get back to work!’”

“Hmm... The length’s an issue, huh? I didn’t think about that.”

Miyako had a point. If you wanted a manuscript right this minute, being greeted instead with a long, overwrought excuse e-mail would probably make anyone say “Enough of that, give me my novel.”

In terms of making a case for himself, however, he *did* need a certain amount of length. That was an issue, and it meant Itsuki’s plan of explaining why he wasn’t at fault so he could escape responsibility quickly fell apart.

“Well, if that’s how it is...maybe I could fall into a situation where I simply can’t write anything?”

“Like?”

“...Like, I went to the bank, but then this robber came in and took everyone hostage, so I can’t leave?”

“That *would* be a good excuse, if it weren’t for the fact you could turn on the TV and immediately tell it was a lie.” Miyako instantly took the wind out of Itsuki’s delusional sails.

“Mmh... Well, let’s say they kidnapped my little sister for ransom. If I spread the word to the general public, they’ll kill her. I’m trying to cobble the money together behind the scenes, ’cause I’ve got to rescue my sister! Now’s no time to be writing stories!”

“Um, you don’t have a sister?”

“...Okay, my brother. I’ll explain the whole thing to Chihiro so he can back me up.”

“You’re gonna rope your own brother into pretending he’s kidnapped?”

“Mmm... That does kind of feel wrong, yeah.”

“Wow... And here I thought sisters were your main thing. So you care about Chihiro, too?”

As Miyako grinned, Itsuki blushed.

“That doesn’t matter! I need to think up a good excuse!”

“Hmmm...” Miyako gave it some thought, despite her lack of interest. “You know, I took some time off work back in January with the flu. The peak of the season is over, but I think it’s still going around.”

“The flu, huh? Mmmm... I’m already writing novels at home and e-mailing them over... I think that monster editor would just tell me to shut up and get to work.”

“Huh. Rough.”

“But illness ain’t a bad idea, no. Something serious enough to excuse me from work...or something that asshole can’t whine at me about...”

Itsuki thoughtfully tried again.

*Hello. This is Hashima. Thankss for your support.
I have cott an STD.
Give m just 2 more dz fr the projeit
Thhgngax*

“Why’re you writing it like that?” Miyako asked, wincing.

“I want it to feel like I’m in distress, delirious from my illness, but I’m still trying my best to contact my editor about it.”

“Ooh, clever...but you’re making too many spelling errors. It feels like you’re doing it on purpose.”

“...True. Let’s cut it in half.”

Accepting Miyako’s astute advice, Itsuki set out to correct his text.

“But why are you labeling this an STD in the first place?”

“Well, that asshole editor of mine, he acts all noble and serious, but I know he loves hittin’ up the sex clubs downtown. Whenever the publisher sends him somewhere on a trip, those are, like, the first places he looks up.”

“...Gross.”

She had never met Kenjiro Toki before, but her opinion of him had just taken a nosedive.

“But if it’s an STD, he definitely can’t bitch about that. He’ll feel for me, like ‘Welp, he’s got an STD, so that’s that...’”

“That’s even worse if he sympathizes with you over that...” Miyako blushed a little. “Itsuki, are you...um, leading the kind of social life that’ll make this STD story convincing for him?”

“...!”

Itsuki’s eyebrows shot up at the observation. It was fairly likely Toki assumed Itsuki was a virgin (correctly). He also knew that Itsuki had been spurning Nayuta’s advances every chance he got. The idea of Itsuki suddenly getting an STD would be a lot for him to swallow.

“...Mmph. So much for that,” he groaned in frustration. Then his face brightened again.

“Miyako!”

“Y-yeah?”

“Lemme take a picture of you doing an *ahegao* double peace!”

“An *ahegao* double... What?”

“What I’m talking about is, I want you look like you’ve had so much sex that your pleasure sensors have gone into overload. This facial expression is known as the *ahegao*. You roll your eyes back, keep your mouth open, stick out your tongue and drool a little, go into huge spasms, and then make the peace sign with both hands.”

“Huh?”

“You know, like you’re on a crazy trip? Umm, kinda like this.”

He showed off his best ahegao double peace.

“Agh! What’s *with* that face? And why do you want a picture of that?!”

Itsuki condescendingly explained to the startled Miyako.

“I’ll attach it to the e-mail and say ‘Here’s the slut who gave me the STD!’ He’s *got* to believe me then—”

“I’m not doing that, you prick!!”

“Agh!”

She backed up the declaration with a slap to the cheek, breathing ragged as her face turned red. “This is ridiculous! I’m going home! Stop thinking up all these stupid-ass excuses and just focus on getting a few more words into your novel! All right?!”

“All right... (´ω`).” He despondently nodded.

Miyako sighed and muttered “I swear...” under her breath as she turned to open the door and leave—just as a man in a business suit walked into the room with a grim expression on his face.

“Huh?! Wh-why’re you in here?” Miyako yelled.

“Oh, pardon me,” the man said with a short bow. “My name is Toki, and I’m this idiot’s assigned editor.”

Miyako eyed Kenjiro Toki carefully. So this was the man. He looked like a perfectly decent member of society, not the kind of man who paid for quasi-legal sexcapades all the time. But she knew you couldn’t judge a book by its cover.

Ignoring her, Toki drilled his eyes into Itsuki, who gasped in fear and confusion.

“Wha... *How?! How the hell did you find me here...?!’*”

“...The last time we met, I installed a location-tracker app on your phone, in case you decided to run on me.”

“Ah...?! You messed with my phone?! That’s against the law!” Itsuki protested.

“Sometimes I have to break the law if I want a book out on time. That’s what it means to be an editor.”

That’s really going too far, Miyako thought, although she was too polite to say it. *This guy really is a weirdo...or maybe all editors are like this.*

“Ngh... Well, congratulations on chasing me down this far...but too bad! I haven’t written up Volume Five yet!”

“...Don’t back-sass me, dumbass.” Toki steeled his gaze. “If you haven’t, then I’ll make you write it. Come with me.”

“Agh?! What’re you doing?!”

Grabbing Itsuki by the arm, Toki used his other hand to put his

computer back in his bag as he pulled him closer.

“Wh-where’re you taking me?! You...you aren’t gonna stick me in a room until I’m done, are you...?!”

“Yep.”

Toki’s response struck terror into Itsuki’s face.

“W-well, you’re gonna give me a hotel room, at least, right? Like the one Kanikou’s staying at...”



“You crazy? In our company, the only authors who get hotels are Ms. Kani and anyone who’s had work adapted into anime. You know where we’re going; you were there two years ago. The Lockdown in the publisher’s basement.”

“Ah...?! N-noooooooo! You can’t lock me up in that dark room again! Noooooooo!”

Itsuki screamed like a nefarious abomination being sealed back into another dimension as Toki ruthlessly dragged him off.

“L-let me go, you vicious monster! You can take away my physical freedom, but you can’t take away my mind! S-stop! Quit dragging me around... Aghh!”

Despite being of medium build at best, Toki was pretty muscular—enough to easily keep Itsuki and his beanpole frame from mounting any resistance.

Just as they were about to struggle out of the room, Toki stopped and turned toward Miyako.

“...Sorry, are you Itsuki’s girlfriend?”

“N-no! Just a friend from college!”

Toki gave the red-faced Miyako a thoughtful look as she corrected him. He took a business card out from his pocket and offered it to her. “...This idiot might try to run on me again. If he does, contact me here.”

“O-okay,” Miyako said, nodding nervously.

“...I’ll take care of the bill here, so feel free to relax for a while longer.”

“Oh, um...thanks...”

With that, Toki whirled around.

“Let me go! Miyako! Help meeee!” Itsuki shouted as he was dragged off.

Left to herself, Miyako glanced at Toki’s card. *Hmm. “Editor,” huh...?* She didn’t know exactly what that entailed, but now she had the impression that it wasn’t too easy on a man. No wonder he was into the sex clubs. Now it made sense, sort of.

Inside the Lockdown

•Camping Toilet

Allows authors to relieve themselves inside the room. A sign of the editors' grace, ensuring writers don't waste a single second they don't have to.

•Desk

Made of cold steel, without a single thing to break the focus.

Camping Toilet

Desk

•Left-Hand Wall

The remains of a hole dug by a past resident can be seen here. Looking for a diversion, no doubt.

Left-Hand Wall

•Right-Hand Wall

Writers have chiseled creative messages into it like "HELP," "itchy tasty," "Sorry," and "Let me see my family."

Right-Hand Wall

Door

•Door

Cannot be opened without a keycard, but nobody who goes inside is allowed to have one. A small window on the bottom is provided, large enough to provide the writer energy drinks, rice balls, and other refreshments.

The Lockdown

Officially called the "Creators' Room." Located in the publisher's basement, it's the place authors are shut into when they're in danger of breaking Real Deadlines. It was originally used as a room where unwanted employees were assigned to mundane tasks, in hopes they would quit instead of get fired and thus be eligible for extra compensation. This practice was quietly ended when a similar room at a video game company was exposed to the mainstream media, causing a furor. Now renamed the Creators' Room, it is officially a place of lodging for authors focusing on their work.

The Usual Sort of Ending

It took a grand total of three days for Itsuki to finish up the full manuscript and be freed from the Lockdown.

What a wonderful world it was. What a wonderful life. Everything seemed to shine and sparkle along the well-trodden five-minute walking path Itsuki took back to his apartment.

The final part of *Sisterly Combat*, Volume 5 involved the protagonist Sieg taking on a powerful foe—the one he fled from earlier, out of fear for his life—and defeating it. Sieg was going into a battle he knew he had little chance of winning, even with every iota of strength he had. His mental state linked up rather well with Itsuki's, as he fought his own powerful foe—his deadline—in the dark and cramped chamber. It resulted in a tremendous you-are-there feeling to the battle scene in the novel.

Dealing with an enemy that he couldn't even scratch, no matter how much he attacked, Sieg (Itsuki) almost found himself falling into a pit of despair. But the thing that helped both of them rise up and grow stronger was a nice little memory from their everyday lives.

I want to see Hilde's smile again.

I want to eat Chihiro's cooking again.

I want to drink beer and screw around with Haruto and Miyako again.

I want to play games and go traveling with Setsuna again.

I want Ashley to call me "big brother" again.

I want to see Nayuta again.

I want Kenjiro Toki's dick to fall off from an STD.

"I swear to all that is holy, I will return to Hilde!! I can't afford to die—not here, of all places!!"

"I wanna go home, drink, and go to bed!! I can't let this deadline kill me!!"

Toward the end of his tale, Itsuki shouted that aloud—just as he

was depicting Sieg doing the same, baring his soul. It was the clarion call for Sieg and Itsuki's smashing counterattack, and before long, Sieg had successfully smote the foe nobody believed he could conquer.

And once he did, Itsuki had successfully completed his manuscript—before the Real Deadline, even, something nobody believed he could make.



“Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...”

Back in his room for the first time in three days, Itsuki heaved a mighty sigh.

The sense of relief, exhilaration, and near-omnipotence that came after completing a volume was always a wonderful thing, no matter how often he tasted it, but this time was special. Right now, he was the most formidable warrior in the world, one who took on a deadly trial and lived to tell the tale.

“I am the strooonnnnggeeessttt!!”

He unironically shouted the moment the front door was locked behind him, still not quite fully disengaged from Sieg mode yet. In reality, he was stinking of sweat from not bathing or changing clothes for three days, the lack of sleep gave him deep bags under his eyes, his cheeks were hollow and gaunt from living on nothing but energy drinks and the barest minimum of food, his hair was unkempt, his face starting to grow a beard, and overall he looked less the “strongest” and more like some hapless soldier fleeing from a losing battle. Luckily, no one was there to mention that to him.

Right. First, a shower. Then a nice, cold beer as I watch the anime that should've been recorded for me.

He tossed his bag down, took off his shoes, and—not bothering to wait for the bathroom—peeled off all the sweaty clothes he spent the last seventy-two hours in. He was just about to remove his underpants when:

“Oh, welcome back...bro.....?”

The door to the living room opened, revealing Chihiro.

“Ah...”

Itsuki froze, hands ready to lower his undies. Chihiro had a key to the place, and he'd occasionally come over when Itsuki was gone for extended periods to handle the laundry and cleaning. His presence here was thus not unusual at all.

“Uh-umm, sorry,” Chihiro said, blushing and turning his back.

“N-no, I, uh... Were you cleaning?”

“Y-yeah... Mr. Toki said you’d probably be able to come home this evening, so he wanted me to get dinner ready and wait for you, so...”

Something did smell good, over in the kitchen. A covered frying pan was on one stove burner, and Itsuki could see several dishes lined up on the kotatsu table in the living room.

“...Asshole didn’t have to do that,” Itsuki muttered.

Chihiro’s disappointment was clear in his voice. “I’m sorry, was this going too far?”



“N-no,” he stammered, “I didn’t mean it like that! It’s just a figure of speech! I just mean, like, first he throws me in that jail cell, then he arranges this so I’ll like him again... He’s such a conniving bastard like that! But you’re fine! I really appreciate it when you cook for me!”

“Oh, good,” Chihiro replied with a smile as he turned back around, only to blush all over again. “Um, just go take a shower, okay? Dinner’ll be ready in a little bit.”

“Y-yeah, sure.”

Having one’s brother see you almost naked isn’t *that* big of a deal, but given how ashamed Chihiro acted over it, Itsuki couldn’t help but feel awkward himself. He picked up the shirt and pants he had thrown on the floor and headed for the bathroom.



After taking a hot shower and shaving his beard off, Itsuki finally felt alive once more.

He was now fully clothed and in the living room, Chihiro waiting for him there by the kotatsu. On the table were some paella, fried shrimp, spring rolls, *karaage* chicken, seafood salad, and a whole bunch of Itsuki’s other favorites.

“...Wow,” an admiring Itsuki said.

“I kind of made too much,” Chihiro bashfully replied.

“Nah, you’re fine. Haruto and Kanikou are bound to show up sooner or later, so it’ll work out,” her brother said as he fished a cold beer from the fridge.

The beer was an Edelweiss Weissbier Snowfresh, a clean-tasting light beer from Austria that wasn’t too bitter—right now, he wanted something refreshing he could chug, not a deep, high-ABV beer that was better off being savored longer. Opening the cap and pouring the hazy, slightly wheat-colored beer into a glass, he could smell the Alpine herbs waft up in glorious fashion.

“Ooh, that smells good,” Chihiro commented.

“Yeah, right?” Itsuki replied, a flood of emotions erupting as the glass filled up.

“Great job, *me!*!”

“Yeah, great job,” came Chihiro’s follow-up.

Itsuki took in a mouthful. The invigorating taste and refreshing aroma were perfect after climbing out of hell the way he did, and now it spread across his entire mouth, filling him with an indescribable

sort of happiness.

“Phaaaah...”

The herbs were still on his tongue as he jabbed a fork into a shrimp in the salad, lettuce and all. The seasoned, savory shrimp matched perfectly with the acidity of the aurora sauce, working well with the beer to boot. This was followed by the fried shrimp and paella—packed with the salt and oil his body was craving, and fulfilling those needs from the bottom of his heart.

“This is great... The shrimp’s so good...”

It was the first decent human meal in three days, and it was shrimp, his favorite. The sheer overwhelming emotion almost brought him to tears. And the sight of him so intently eating all of this made Chihiro watch happily as well.



After stuffing himself, Itsuki went right off to sleep, his three-day encounter with hell finally taking its toll on him. He slept straight until well into the next afternoon, before a call from Haruto finally woke him up.

“Hey, good work. Now that you’re out of hell, let’s go have a cherry-blossom viewing party today!”

“Huhh?”

“Cherry blossoms, man! We’ll go out and hang out under the trees and eat and drink and stuff.”

“I...I wanna do that...,” he groggily replied.

“Yeah! I’ll head over there around three. I already reached out to Nayu and Miyako and Chihiro about it. See you then.”

“Mmh...”

After he spent the next hour or so lying spaced out in bed, Chihiro showed up to put last night’s leftovers in boxes and make some rice balls and sandwiches.

“Hey, bro, you better get ready to go soon, all right? Why don’t you go take a shower?”

“Hrmhhh... Ngahh...”

Just as his consciousness was starting to get it together, the doorbell rang—not Haruto and the gang, but a package deliveryman. Inside were several bottles of Japanese sake. *Why sake...?* Itsuki thought as he checked the sender. It was a name he sort of, but kind of not really, remembered. It was only when he traced his memory back to Ashley’s visit ten or so days ago that he realized it was from the town he volunteered to pay part of his taxes to, as part of the hometown-tax system. They had already sent his thank-you sake.

“...Well, a promise is a promise...” Itsuki sighed. “Chihiro?”

“Yeah?”

“Could you make something that’ll work well with sake, too? Like...”

He tried to come up with an example, but he drank beer so much more often than sake that he didn’t really know what foods were best for it.

But Chihiro apparently did. “Oh, sure. Let’s see what I’ve got here... Well, I know squid, octopus, and clams go well with sake... Eggs and *mentaiko* roe do nicely, I think... Oh, and I think cream cheese does, too.”

“Wow, you know a lot,” a surprised Itsuki noted.

“Yeah, well, my dad likes sake a lot, so sometimes I whip up stuff for him.”

“Oh yeah...?”

The conversation went no further, as Itsuki headed for the bathroom to wash up.



It was a bit past three.

Itsuki and his friends were at a nearby park. This was a small one, with a few mid-sized cherry trees dotting the otherwise sparse landscape. It was originally meant as a public evacuation point following an earthquake or other disaster, not as a fun playground, so there wasn’t much equipment to play with and zero children were nearby, despite it being the middle of spring break. There was a much larger park, one noted for the cherry blossoms around this time of year, about a fifteen-minute walk away, so nobody bothered to picnic here during the season. Beyond Itsuki’s group, there were a couple guys in business suits taking a break with a smoke—probably salesmen making the rounds.

Why did they choose this park? Chiefly, it was because none of them had a great interest in cherry-blossom hunting; as long as there was food and booze, anyplace worked. With that frame of mind, there was no need to travel to some faraway park and jockey with a million other people for ground space.

Spreading out a plastic mat under what was more or less the most majestic-looking tree in the park, the group opened up the boxes. They were Itsuki and Chihiro, Haruto, Miyako, and Ashley Ono. Itsuki was the one who invited Ashley—he called her to say the sake had arrived, and as they spoke, he mentioned they would be having a picnic shortly. This was greeted with a very pointed response

“Aww... But it was a lot nicer than I thought, though, living within walking distance of you. Maybe I should keep living in that hotel after they’re done renovating my place... And you’re invited to stay over again too, Myaa.”

“F-forget it! You’ll just do something weird to me again...”

“Something weird?”

“It—it’s none of your business, Itsuki!”

“Well, me and Myaa got totally naked and—”

“Ahhhh! No no no no! No way!”

“What’re you people even doing...?”

It was an odd group of people—novelists, a college student, a high schooler, and a tax accountant. Apart from Itsuki and Haruto, none of them knew Ashley, and Chihiro was seeing Haruto and Miyako for only the second time. But the scene was still oddly friendly. And what’s more:

“...Looks like you’re having fun.”

Itsuki’s editor, Kenjiro Toki, had just strolled into the park.

“Gehhh?! I—I already gave you my manuscript! I’m a free man!”

“Yeah... Yeah, you sure did. That’s why I got a little gift for you... See? Some lobster.”

Itsuki’s eyes grew larger at the sight of three Japanese spiny lobsters, all char-grilled to perfection.

“L-lobster?! How?!”

“I had a Spanish restaurant near the office cook ’em up for me.”

“Wowwww! Kenkennnnnn!!”

“Don’t hug me, you weirdo. You drunk already?”

“I’m sorry I called you an asshole and wished for your dick to fall off and stuff! I’ll follow you wherever you go, Kenken!”

“I’d prefer if you didn’t... Work’s finally settled down for me, too, so I figured I’d join in. These things cost a bunch, you know.”

After tossing Itsuki into the Lockdown for three days to make him finish the text, Toki had been groveling to the illustrator, the designer, the proofreader, the editor in chief and sales department, and everyone else involved with getting *Sisterly Combat* into print so he could make the schedule work out. The ordeal was no less painful than the one Itsuki went through.

Grabbing a paper cup of beer from Haruto, Toki set right to drinking. The apparent fatigue from all the work he did made him drunk almost immediately—which, naturally, meant it was time to harangue Itsuki again.

“L-I-like, like, I *know* you can do it if you try, so why don’cha try f’m the *start* f’r a change, huh, Itsuki?”

“Huhhh? Sh-shut up, you asshole! I—I can’t try until you—you drive me into a c’rner ’n’ stuff!”

“Yeh? Okay, I’ll set up the sh-sh-schedule so yer in the corner fromma *start!*”

“Whaaa?! Shudda hell up, I’m gonna kill ya, ya sex maniac!”

With Itsuki just as inebriated as his editor, they were both having pronunciation issues as they argued. Ashley, sake cup in hand, watched on admiringly.

“Hee-hee... Being an editor certainly seems like a tough job...”

I hope she’s fine, Chihiro thought as he poured Ashley another cup. The sight of someone as young-looking as her drinking was a tad alarming.

“I really like these snacks you made, too. These thingies with the cream cheese inside the squid, especially... Magnificent.”

“Oh, thank you.”

“...Did you make these, by the way? The snacks and this other food?”

“Um, yeah, pretty much...”

Ashley gave the nodding Chihiro an admiring look. “Hmm... Impressive, given how young you are... Do you think you’d like to work part-time for me, maybe? My door’s always open for youngsters good in the kitchen.”

“Huh?! B-but I can’t really do anything besides cook...”

“That’s good enough for me, truly. If you want, though, I could help you study bookkeeping?”

“Oh...?”

The most Chihiro could do now was organize Itsuki’s receipts by month. But with a professional accountant providing instruction, maybe there were ways to help Itsuki more than ever before.

“...I’ll have to think about it.”

Chihiro gave an earnest reply.



As Itsuki and the gang were enjoying themselves at the park, ace illustrator Setsuna Ena was paying a visit to Itsuki’s apartment.

Nobody answered the door.

“Huh. Is he out?”

Well, so be it. Without a cell phone, Setsuna had no way of contacting someone before he stopped by. If the other people were out or busy, there wasn’t much to do but give up.

“Ah, well,” he indifferently muttered as he left the apartment building.



Toki was swimming in a river of alcohol, and given the tension surrounding the springtime event, Itsuki, Miyako, and Haruto were all going at a pretty fast clip themselves. It wasn't too long before the beer cooler was almost completely exhausted.

"I'm gonna go to my brother's place to pick up some beer and Pocari." Chihiro stood up.

"I'll join you!" Nayuta volunteered, but Chihiro shook his head.

"No, I'll be fine by myself."

"Really? Mmm, well, it's getting dark, so watch out for molesters."

"I—I'll be fine! I'm... I'm a guy, so..." Chihiro seemed a bit unnerved.



Away from Itsuki's apartment, Setsuna was wandering around, looking for someplace to eat dinner. There were many restaurants near the rail station, but he decided to deliberately check out some of the more deserted areas.

"It'd be nice if there was some hidden gem around here..."

As his eyes darted around his surroundings, he passed by a fetching young woman in a hoodie. She wasn't dressed in anything fancy, but that served to emphasize her well-formed features.

"Whoa, pretty cute," Setsuna said as he turned around. "!!"

The woman's rear was like being struck by lightning.

As his pen name (which literally meant "jiggly butt") implied, Setsuna was a huge fan of people's asses. He liked drawing them, and he liked looking at them, too. It didn't matter if they were 2-D, 3-D, young, old, male, female; he believed the ass was the most beautiful part of the human body.

He may have had a natural gift for drawing asses, one that he was lucky enough to earn great appreciation for, but he also had a singular genius for spotting asses as well. Whether covered by undies or pants, Setsuna could feel the inner beauty of the ass that lay beneath—the sheer *power* of the ass.

"Beautiful ass, beautiful heart" was his motto. That was part of the reason he liked Itsuki, even—the power of his ass was fantastic.

As such an uncommonly talented ass artist, Setsuna Ena's supernatural ass scouter was sounding the alarm. This girl's ass was a once-per-century, maybe once-per-millennium level of beauty.

He had to see it. He had to see that girl's ass!

Doing so, he felt, would change his entire viewpoint of the world. He was sure it'd help him advance his illustrations one level further. As an artist, as an ass lover, and as a man, he simply had to witness her ass for himself!

“Uh, hey, wait a second!!”

“...?” The woman turned around, eyebrows raised in suspicion. “Hmm? Do you mean me?”

“Yeah! Yeah, you!”

“...What is it?” the girl asked, staring at Setsuna as his breathing turned ragged.

No, he thought. *Don't look at me; turn around.* He stared at her intently, his ass-gazing eyes yearning to be quenched.

“Could I look at your ass for a second?”

“Huh...?”

The girl stared blankly at him.

“Your ass! Your butt! I want you to show me your rear end!”

“Wh-what are you talking about?!”

“Please! Please, this is all I want in life! Please show me your ass!”

“N-no thank you! Stop acting so weird!”

“I’m not acting weird! I’m being totally serious!”

“Well, I’m not gonna show you, all right?!”

The girl ran off, terror in her face.

“W-wait a second! I’ll do anything for you!”

“Stay away from me, you pervert!”

“But, but your *aaassssssssssssssssssss!!*”



Setsuna's hands, stretched out to their far limits, grabbed the woman around her pants.

Zzzzzip—

Down came the pants, revealing a pair of simple white undergarments. *No! No, this cloth doesn't matter!*

"O-one more..."

Turning toward the pleading Setsuna, the woman stared him down.

"Nn..."

Her expression was bright red now, racked with shame and anger.

"Knock it the *hell* off!!"

"Arahghhh?!"

The high kick unleashed by the supple legs attached to the once-in-a-millennium ass landed a clean hit on Setsuna's face, sending his body flying as it knocked him out.



"Oh, man, I swear...", Chihiro mumbled, voice almost breaking into tears.

So it happened after all. A weird criminal, on the way to Itsuki's house. His hair was dyed in a pretty stand-out color, and he was around the same age as Chihiro. He strode right up, demanded to see some ass pronto, and even got all physically grabby. Lucky thing the full-strength kick landed where it did.

But is he all right...?

Chihiro tapped at the man, lying prone against the wall. He groaned a little bit in response. At least he wasn't dead, then.

Was that him flirting with me, or...?

"Flirting" didn't quite sound like the right word for it, but whatever.

Leaving the man behind, Chihiro hurried over to Itsuki's apartment, grabbing some beer and sports drinks and stuffing them into a recyclable shopping bag. The beer was soon back at the park, delivered via a longer, roundabout path so there was no chance of running into that weirdo again.

Itsuki said hello first, looking a bit worried, as Toki sprawled out next to him.

"Hey, did something happen?"

"N-no, nothing. Just kind of took the long way."

There was no way Chihiro could tell the truth.



The picnic continued for the rest of the afternoon, until the sun finally said its final good-bye. The beer reinforcements were fully drunk, and the mountains of food had been eaten up. The cherry blossoms, lit up dimly by the nearby streetlights, were fairly elegant, and Ashley was nursing her final cup.

“Hee-hee... I hope we can all do this again next year,” she said, sighing her captivating little sigh.

“...Yeah...,” Itsuki vaguely replied, his voice heavy as he reflected over the words.

Miyako, Nayuta, and Chihiro eyed him with confusion.

“Ha-ha! You’re making this sound like a conversation branch in a video game.” Haruto intervened, laughing even as there was a bit of gloom to his face.

Ashley gave him a lonely smile. “Well, who can say how a writer’s life will turn out?”

“...Yeah, true.”

She had provided tax services for a large number of writers up to now, getting to gauge each of their financial situations. She knew full well how unstable a novelist’s life could be. Nayuta and Haruto hit it big with their respective debut titles; Itsuki was lucky enough to build a decent fan base and decent earnings not too long after he started, but they were by far the happiest examples.

Three other authors had made their debut alongside Itsuki and Haruto in the new writers contest they placed in. Two of them had had their debut novel, their follow-up, and their third novel sell below expectations, driving them into frustration and retirement. The other one had a debut series that sold fairly decently, but fell into a slump once the second title launched; currently, that particular writer was working part-time while polishing up an outline for a new series with his editor.

It was a pretty common thing to see with any publisher—new authors talking about how they’ll all work hard to succeed together at one award ceremony, only to be completely absent at next year’s event. And it didn’t just happen to rookies, either. Authors could suddenly lose all ability to write; they could fall into despair after having one too many series canceled; the stress could break them down; or physical illness or injury could affect their lives. There were lots of ways they could fall out of the business.

Even with the three success stories here, they could likely keep up the current status quo for maybe a few years. Beyond that, no one could say. An author’s shelf life could often be just as fleeting as the

blossoms that fly away, only to bloom again next year.

“Yeah, well, I know *I’m* all right!”

Itsuki flashed a brazen smile as he tried to break the solemn tone the conversation took.

“The new *Sisterly Combat* volume coming out next month is my greatest masterpiece yet. And if I’m capable of writing a masterpiece like *that*, I just know the future’s comin’ up roses for me!”

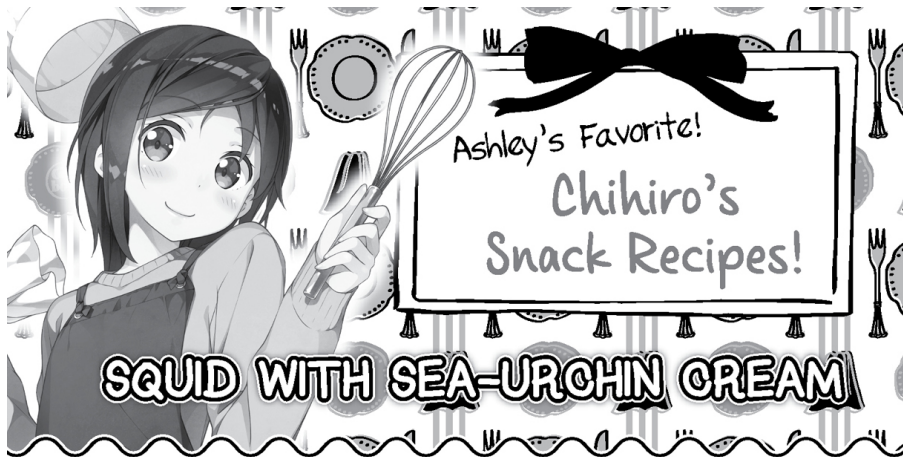
Haruto and Ashley smiled at the sentiment.

“Hee-hee... It better be, for my sake. If I lose a customer, that’s a little bit less money I’m making, after all. So hang in there...big brother.”

“Yes, ma’am! I’ll work myself to the bone for my little sister!” He huffed with enthusiasm.

Chihiro looked on, a bit peeved, as the picnic wrapped up. They all helped cart the trash off as they went their separate ways.

All who remained under the cherry tree was Kenjiro Toki, snoring loudly. He would have to go to work the next morning covered in grass, dirt, and petal stains, but **this happened all the time with editors** so his boss didn’t yell at him about it.



SQUID WITH SEA-URCHIN CREAM

【INGREDIENTS】

Boiled spear squid: As needed
Walnuts: As needed
Cream cheese: As needed

Dried soy-sauce konbu seaweed: As needed
Ground sea urchin (canned): As needed

【STEPS】

- ① Combine the ground sea urchin with the cream cheese. (Around 8 parts cheese to 1 part sea urchin. Feel free to adjust to your liking.)
- ② Add the crushed walnuts and konbu to the mixture from step 1. Your sea-urchin cream is complete!
- ③ Scoop out the contents of the spear squid and fill with sea-urchin cream.
- ④ Cut the squid into round slices and serve.

HINT!

After finishing step 3, chill the squid in the fridge for 5 minutes for easier cutting!



Chronica Chronicle (Part 2)

It was early April, about a week after the cherry-blossom party. All the anime series that began in January were nearing their final episodes, with a whole bunch of new series kicking off to replace them. Haruto Fuwa's series, *Chevalier of the Absolute World*, was one of these new spring anime, and episode one was airing on TV late that night.

Haruto was heading over to Itsuki's place to commemorate the occasion. He, Itsuki, Nayuta, Miyako, and Chihiro were planning to spend the evening playing their tabletop RPG while eating dinner, with Chihiro leaving afterward since school loomed the next day.

Kawabe, Haruto's editor, had been set to take Chihiro's place, but a sudden business trip prevented him from attending, so the remaining four decided to spend the night drinking beer (or root beer, in Nayuta's case), wait for the anime to air, watch it, then drink until morning.

That was later, though. It was still five in the afternoon, and Haruto took the seat of honor at the kotatsu low table, joined by Itsuki, Nayuta, Miyako, and Chihiro. Before them was a spread of light snacks to game with, from crackers topped with cheese and ham to veggie sticks and small sandwiches.

"Kay, how 'bout we get started?"

He passed out character sheets for the four players, acting oddly fidgety about beginning the game. They would be continuing where they left off with their RPG session last month, which ended rather abruptly when Haruto had some sudden business to attend to, so everyone was looking forward to starting it up again.

The adventure was set in the land of Gagagia, a small kingdom in what *seemed* like a generic fantasy world, no special twists to it. The party was a group of four adventurers, all sisters and former heiresses to a noted noble family in another nation. They had grown weary of the aristocratic power struggles that came with life in nobility, so they ran away from home and became adventurers instead.

The eldest sister: Miyako Midfield, played by Miyako Shirakawa. Gifted in long-range attack magic, her Thor's Bullet skill let her

shoot out mithril bullets with an electric burst.

The second sister: Tsukiko Midfield, played by Itsuki Hashima.

A frontline fighter wielding sword and shield, her unique Phantom Smith skill let her copy any weapon that appeared in the game and perform that weapon's intrinsic action.

The third sister: Sen Midfield, played by Chihiro Hashima.

A thief type who had mastered bow and dagger-driven attacks, her Jaldabaoth skill let her nullify any magic with a single touch, as well as destroy potions and other magic items.

The fourth and youngest sister: Deathmask Midfield, played by Nayuta Kani.

A monk type who had mastered healing magic and melee attacks with blunt weapons. Her Lilim's Kiss skill let her vastly boost the stats of anyone she kissed or otherwise made skin-to-skin contact with.

GM (Haruto): Okay, let's recap the story so far. We're in the town of Aegis, in a remote part of the kingdom of Gagagia. The four of you have arrived here, only to get caught in a fight with some local adventurers. You made it through the battle, but after Deathmask used Lilim's Kiss on Miyako, you both wound up naked and caused such a huge furor that the local constables arrested you for public indecency and placed all of you in jail.

Miyako (Miyako): Ohhh, yeah, that did happen, didn't it? I wish I didn't have to recall that...

Deathmask (Nayuta): Honestly, I can't believe how shameless a woman my big sister Myaa is.

Miyako: *You're* the one who stripped me down to nothing!

GM: All right, no infighting, guys... As the four of you discussed what you'll do next, here in this dungeon on the edge of town, you were approached by an elegant and beautiful blond-haired woman, one who looked quite out of place in this prison. She introduced herself as Sylvia, daughter of the lord of town, and she apparently had a favor to ask you.

Sen (Chihiro): Yeah, and I think we had just agreed to hear her out when we got interrupted.

Tsukiko (Itsuki): Right, yeah... All right, Sylvia, or whatever you call yourself. Go ahead and say your piece.

GM: You guys sure like acting cocky, considering you're locked in a prison cell. Um, taking up your invitation, Sylvia begins to speak. "About a month ago, a horde of orcs took up residence in an old fort

in the forests to the north, using it as a base to attack the nearby villages.”

Deathmask: Ooh, orcs!

Miyako: ...Why do you sound so happy about that?

Deathmask: Well, when you think of orcs, they play a big role in pretty much any sexy scene in a fantasy game. I look forward to the classic fan service when Tsukiko gets assaulted by one or two or three of them.

Tsukiko: Oh, God, not if *I* can help it! ...That’s not in the script, right?

GM: That depends on how you play, doesn’t it? Moving on... “What I want you to do is defeat this orc horde for us. If you are willing to take on this mission, I will free you under my name as the lord’s daughter. We will also pay you a reward, albeit a small one, and you may do what you like with any treasure the orcs have stockpiled.”

Miyako: If it’ll get us out of here, then we’ll gladly accept! Right?

Sen: Hmm... I think this is kind of fishy.

Miyako: Oh?

Sen: There’s a ton of other adventurers in town, right? Why is she enlisting us for this instead of them? She doesn’t even know how strong we are.

Miyako: Well, it’s just to keep the story going along, isn’t it?

GM: ...That’s some perceptive thinking, Sen. Sylvia explains her motives: “There are a lot of accessible opportunities for adventurers in the lands around town, from dungeon looting to monster hunting. Most of them opt for that low-hanging fruit instead of daring to challenge the terrifying orcs in the dangerous northern forest. I have offered them what reward I can, but I was flatly refused.”

Deathmask: So you’re having us do it since we’re in jail for public indecency? And you’ll let us out, too? That makes sense.

GM: “Do you accept, then?”

Tsukiko: ...Hang on a second. That does make sense...but given Haruto’s writing style, I’m thinking there’s some kind of crazy twist waiting for us.

GM: Huh?

Tsukiko: You know, you generally go with the norm, revving the plot up with this or that event, and then you add some kind of twist to keep it from being too orthodox. That’s the pattern with every *Chevalier of the Absolute World* volume ever.

Miyako: Wow, really?

GM: No, um, Tsukiko...

Tsukiko: Like, just off the top of my head—this Sylvia lady is beautiful and acting nice to us and all, but she might actually be the main villain.

GM: ...!

Tsukiko: The orc hunt's just a pretext, and she's got some other hidden goal... Like, maybe one of Sylvia's political rivals has an opium field or a secret lab in the forest that's one of their main financial sources, and she's trying to have us blow the door open on that. We've just come to town, we haven't registered with the Guild yet, and her rivals wouldn't know a thing about us. If we mess up, she could just kill us and cover her tracks, so we're the perfect pawns for

"Um, Itsuki?" Haruto scowled, cutting off Itsuki's speech.

"Mmm?"

"Professional authors are not allowed to guess at plot developments, all right?!"

Haruto had finally exploded.

"Oh, was he right?" Nayuta asked.

He silently nodded. Itsuki had almost perfectly guessed the full scenario his GM had developed.

He mumbled sulkily to himself. "...Like, maybe it's my fault. Maybe that's what I get for thinking up something you could guess at, but *still*... Like, going all meta and using the GM's writing style to guess at the story kind of makes it hard to run a game, you know..."

"Oh...um...yeah... Sorry," Itsuki said awkwardly. He was a little-sister-obsessed maniac, generally naive, weirdly proud of himself, easily riled to anger, incredibly gullible, and more than a bit spoiled, but his story-analyzing skills were truly professional level.

Haughty, naive, easily riled, but useful in a pinch. That reminded Haruto of something.

"...Why do you have to be such a princess-knight type, man?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind," Haruto told the confused Itsuki.

"Anyway, quit guessing at the story and just have fun playing in the game world, okay? All *I'm* thinking about is having sex with my big sis!"

"Think about some other stuff, too, you perv." Itsuki jabbed at Nayuta as he nodded. "...But all right. From now on, I'm just Tsukiko the tizzy-headed princess fighter. And I completely believe Sylvia's story! She's such a neat and elegant lady; there's no way she could be hiding something!"

"You don't have to be that cooperative for me," a somewhat embarrassed Haruto commented.

GM: "So you accept, then?" Sylvia says, smiling warmly at you. Itsuki saw through all of it so it's kind of moot now, but you could try

rolling for Charisma or Intuition to see if there's anything fishy about her tale.

Deathmask: Let's do that, for the heck of it. Maybe it'll give us an advantage later, if we see through it.

The four sisters rolled their dice—for either Charisma or Intuition, whichever one each of them was better at. Tsukiko and Miyako had two dice, while Sen and Deathmask, with their superior Intuition, had three. If any one of them rolled high enough, they'd be able to detect Sylvia's true motives...but none of them managed it.

GM: So you decided to trust Sylvia at her word.

Sen: I guess we're gonna take this job, but I'd like some more information first.

GM: "I would be more than willing to tell you what I am aware of."

Miyako: Oh, that is so barefaced...

Deathmask: Knowing she's got an ulterior motive like this makes it kind of frustrating, huh? If I could create some kind of unique temptation skill, I could've forced her to ally with us no matter what she's plotting, but...

It's worth noting, by the way, that Protea, one of the players in the *Grancrest Replay: Live Factory* book, actually does have a "temptation" skill like the one Nayuta mentioned. This lets her not only extract information from people and carry out infiltration jobs, but also lets her "tempt" enemies, allies, random NPCs, and other player characters—everyone she runs into, letting her probe the far edges of good taste.

Good thing Nayuta doesn't have anything like that, Haruto thought.

Sen: Well, first, just to make sure, how strong are the orcs in this world? Could we handle them right now?

GM: That's a good question, but Sylvia doesn't know what you're capable of, so it's hard to say. Let's do a Wisdom check.

Deathmask: I'm in the intelligentsia, so I'll go first...  for 13.

GM: I dunno about "intelligentsia," Deathmask, but in that case, you know enough about orcs. This is an extremely belligerent race; they've got tons of brute strength, but they're slow and low in intelligence. I say low, but they can still communicate with speech to their friends, and they can handle simple weapons like swords and bludgeons. Also, for some reason, they love human women. If you fight 'em, a group of four adventurers at level one can handle a single orc without any problem, but one-on-one would be pretty dicey. They're weak against

heat and lightning.

Sen: How's their sense of sight and smell?

GM: ...Didn't think about that... Umm, let's say their sight, hearing, and smell are around the same range as humans.

Sen: How tough is their skin?

GM: About as tough as a real macho human being. A blade could pierce it okay.

Sen: All right... So how many of these orcs are there in the forest?

GM: "I've received a report that there's at least ten of them."

Deathmask: So a frontal assault probably wouldn't work.

Miyako: If they're weak against heat and lightning, my magic would probably help a lot.

Tsukiko: Pfft. Bring 'em on! I don't care how many there are; it'll just be more blood for my sword to taste!

Sen: We just said, bro... I mean, sis. A frontal attack isn't gonna work.

GM: "Are there any other questions?"

Sen: Umm... How far is it to the northern forest, and is there anything dangerous on the way? Like, any monsters besides the orcs there, or animals or plants... Any edible plants, for example. And maybe if there's any freshwater. And what's the climate like in the region...? If it tends to rain a lot, that'll make it hard to use fire, but easier for us to hide ourselves...

Tsukiko:

Miyako:

Deathmask:

GM:

Sen: ...? What?

Tsukiko: ...My little sister's so capable, it's kind of scary.

Sen: Oh, no, not really. I just read some fantasy novels and TRPG replays to prep for this, is all.

GM: Well, I appreciate that enthusiasm, but I've got a lot to live up to, I see... To answer your question, it's a half day's hike from here to the forest. There's a well-built road along the way, so no particular dangers are expected. The forest is populated with deer and wild boars, along with a few weak monsters besides the orcs.

Sen: Do we know what kinds of monsters?

GM: Goblins, slimes, big rats, that kind of thing. I'll go into detail if you run into any, but either way, you're almost guaranteed not to have any trouble with them. The forest has a lot of edible fruits and nuts, and you don't know exactly where any watering holes would be, but they're definitely around, given all the wildlife. It's mild in the forest, and judging by the clouds, you don't anticipate any rain for the next few days. That's about all Sylvia can give you.

Sen: All right. Thank you.

Explaining matters to the dungeon guard, Sylvia set the four sisters free, providing them with some advance payment to prepare for the adventure. Over in town, they purchased Potions to replenish their HP, Magic Potions to fill up their MP, and some flint, rope, torches, and oil flasks.

Current Party

Tsukiko Midfield

LV: 1 HP: 27/27
MP: 10/10 Movement: 3
Status: Normal
Inventory: Potion x3, Rope x1, Torch x1



Sen Midfield

LV: 1 HP: 17/17
MP: 15/15 Movement 4
Status: Magic Break
Inventory: Flint x1, Rope x1, Torch x1,
Oil Flask x1



Miyako Midfield

LV: 1 HP: 14/14
MP: 30/30 Movement: 2
Status: Normal
Inventory: Potion x2, Magic Potion x2



Deathmask Midfield

LV: 1 HP: 19/19
MP: 20/20 Movement: 3
Status: Normal
Inventory: Potion x1, Magic Potion x1



Spending the night at the inn to maximize their HP and MP, the quartet set off for the northern forest the next morning.

GM: So the four of you have reached the entrance to the forest, marking the real start to your adventure. You're aware of the general location of the fort the orcs reportedly took over, but there's no real road that leads there.

Sen: We're gonna have to keep careful track of our direction. Leaving landmarks along the way, that kind of thing.

Miyako: Hey, I've been thinking...

Tsukiko: Hmm?

Miyako: ...Maybe I could use a Fireball to just burn down the forest...?

Deathmask: Ooooh, my big sis Myaa takin' it extreme!

Tsukiko: That's pretty off the wall...

Miyako: Maybe not...

GM: Well, judging by what you can see from the entrance, the forest is densely packed with trees and growth, and the air is dry. If you started a fire, it'd probably spread pretty well.

Miyako: Oh, so I can?

Sen: Tabletop RPGs give you a lot of freedom...

GM: That's the appeal, yeah. I'm willing to let you players do whatever you want in the game, as long as it's within the rules.

Tsukiko: Perfect, then! We'll just roast those orcs along with the rest of the forest.

GM: As you discuss this, the vegetation in front of you begins to shake.

Tsukiko: Oh! A monster?!

GM: Out from the brush hops a cute little wild hare. It turns its big, beady eyes toward you, full of curiosity.

Miyako: ...So the forest has little creatures like this, too...

Deathmask: What should we do, sis? You wanna burn up all these cute li'l guys, too?

Miyako: Oh, of course I can't! That'd be so mean! All right, I guess we'll just have to blaze a trail through the forest.

Tsukiko: Yeah.

Sen: ...So what about this bunny?

Deathmask: What about it, how?

Sen: We could take it for food, you know...

GM: Sen's really taking a hard-boiled approach to this quest... I wasn't expecting you to eat this guy.

Sen: Well, I mean...I heard rabbit tastes good, so...

Tsukiko: It does. I've had it before.

Deathmask: Let's hunt it! This could be a long slog, so we better have some extra food to work with.

Miyako: Aww...

Tsukiko: Okay, li'l sister, do it!

Sen: S-sure... Um, I attack the rabbit with my bow.

GM: ...Okay. You'll have to roll to see if you hit it, just like in battle.

Sen: Um... Dexterity plus 5, so three dice... 16.

GM: That'll do it. Sen's arrow plunges into the wild hare. No point rolling for damage; it's dead.

Miyako: Poor guy...

Sen: I use my dagger to skin and dissect it.

GM: Whoa, you're a wild man... I don't think we need to roll for that. You can add rabbit meat to your inventory if you like.

Sen: All right.

With the rabbit hunt behind them, the party ventured into the forest. Along the way, they encountered a deer and another hare, Sen brutally hunting both of them down.

"...This is sounding less like fantasy and more like a survival story," Miyako observed.

Chihiro tilted his head. "You think? You see people going on hunts a lot in fantasy novels, too..."

"Something tells me that you two see the fantasy genre in two really different ways," Haruto said with a chuckle.

GM: So... Now I'd like all of you to roll for Intuition for me.

Tsukiko: What's up?

GM: Oh, you'll see.

Tsukiko: Hmm...  7.

Deathmask:  14.

Miyako:  6.

Sen:  13... Wait, that's a critical if I roll at least two sixes, right?

GM: If you do that on an accuracy roll, you're guaranteed to hit; if you do it on a damage roll, you get a bonus. In this case, it means you always pass the roll check... So as they walk through the forest, Sen and Deathmask detect several different presences nearby, tracking their party from a distance. Deathmask can only tell there's something there, but Sen can see that those things are goblins, and that there's six of them.

Deathmask: Oooh. Good one, big sis.

Sen: H-hey! Don't pat my head like that! So the goblins have been following us?

GM: The goblins in this world are hostile against the human race.

They're all but guaranteed to try and prey upon you.

Sen: How strong are goblins?

GM: Pretty wimpy. A newbie adventurer can take one on solo and pretty much always win. Getting ambushed by a group of 'em can be dangerous, though.

Tsukiko: I see... So they're waiting for us to let our guard down so they can attack, huh?

Deathmask: I'd like to hit 'em first, before they can do that...but are they bunched up enough that some of Myaa's magic can hit them all?

GM: They're a little too spread out from each other to strike all of them.

Tsukiko: Hmm... Let's aim for when they all bear down on us.

The group discussed the strategy they would take against this pursuing goblin horde. Soon—

Tsukiko: Oops! One of my shoelaces is untied. You go on ahead while I tie it again.

Miyako: All right.

GM: As Tsukiko takes a knee, the rest of the party advances about thirty feet ahead. Just then: "*Gob gob gob gob!*" From the underbrush, six goblins fly out en masse, advancing upon Tsukiko from the rear.

Tsukiko: Bah-ha-ha! Gotcha, you low-level beasts!

GM: So it's off to battle. You guys were expecting them this time, so I'll let you attack in any order you want for the first turn.

Tsukiko: Okay, I'll take one of them out!

Just as battle began, Tsukiko quickly whirled around and charged upon Goblin 2, stabbing right through it with her sword.

"Gobboooooo...!"

With a final scream, the goblin fell, just as Miyako traveled to Tsukiko's position.

"Energy Bolt!"

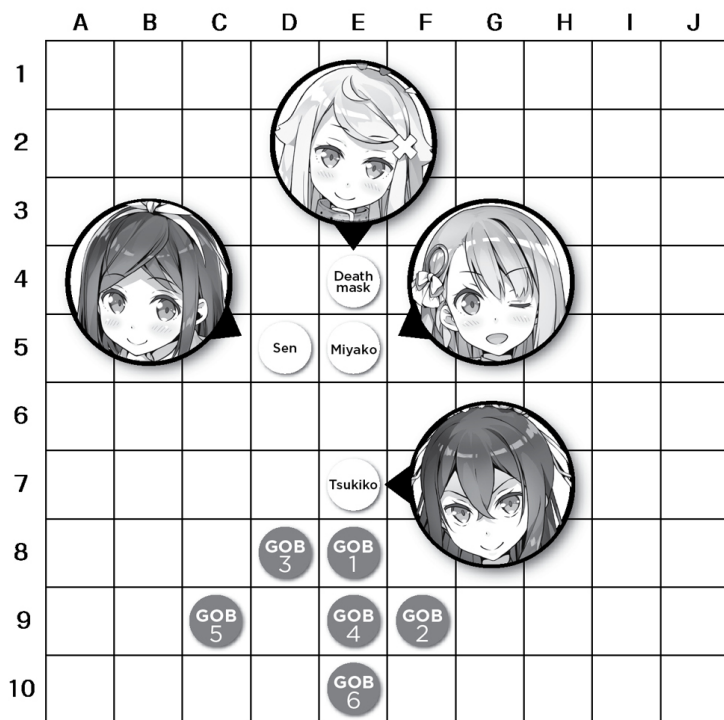
Lightning cracked from her staff, whipping through three of the goblins in a straight line. They collapsed, smoldering with black smoke.

Sen followed this up by taking out Goblin 3 with an arrow. "*G-Gobuuu...*"

The rest of its friends decimated in an instant, Goblin 5 emitted a low, guttural scream and tried to run. Just then:

Bssh!!

An arrow from Sen's bow thudded into the back of his skull, ending his life.



Deathmask: Wow, Sen, no mercy, huh?

Sen: ...I thought he might call for help if we let him go.

GM: Totally hard-boiled... But anyway, you defeated the goblins without taking any damage at all, and so you delve deeper into the forest. After about an hour's hike, the way ahead becomes brighter as the forest opens up.

Miyako: Are we at the fort?

GM: What you see before you is a small, attractive-looking lake. It's a watering hole for the local fauna, and you see deer and boars and rabbits drinking or basking in it.

Deathmask: Well, we'll need to take a bath, won't we?

Tsukiko: Hmm... I suppose this would be a rest point, if this was a video game. We'd recover energy if we rested and stuff, right?

GM: You would.

Miyako: Well, how about we do that? All I've lost is a little MP, but...

Sen: Hmm... I dunno...

Deathmask: Oh, it'll be fine! It's such a pretty lake, there couldn't possibly be any danger!

Tsukiko: ...If this was a movie about sharks or crazed ax murderers, that's exactly the kind of thing the airheaded chick in the swimsuit would say before she got dismembered and eaten first.

Sen: ...In all the RPG replays I've read, whenever a female character takes a shower or something, she almost always gets attacked by monsters or has something else awful happen to her.

GM: Yeah, probably one of the Cthulhu RPGs, huh? Fan service and gory horror scenes seem to go hand-in-hand with those books.

Tsukiko: What a crappy world!

GM: That's what's good about it, though. We could play one of those sometime...but for now, we're in a peaceful fantasy world, so you really don't have to worry about dangers like that cropping up.

Tsukiko: Reeceeeally...?

GM: Well, if you're *that* worried, you could always do an Intuition check. If there's any danger around, you could probably pick up on it.

Following the GM's suggestion, the players all rolled against their Intuition stat. None of them rolled well enough to detect anything.

Deathmask: See? It's totally safe! So it's time for some bathing action, guys! Everybody, clothes off!

Miyako: Mmm... Well, all right, if it's safe.

Sen: Do I have to disrobe, too?

Deathmask: What're you acting so bashful for, big sis? It's just us family here, nobody to bother us as we frolic in the water! There's nothing to be ashamed of! C'mon, Tsukiko, you too!

Sen: Um, okay...

Tsukiko: ...Just don't do anything weird, all right? Promise?

Despite their hesitation, Sen and Tsukiko joined the other two in disrobing, and the four sisters began bathing in the lake.

GM: *Just then!*

Miyako: Huh?

GM: Out of nowhere, an innumerable number of tentacles float up from the water's surface, wrapping themselves around the party's bodies!

Sen: See, I *told* you...

Tsukiko: Ngh! Attacked by tentacles while we bathe... Talk about clichéd...! You put a lot of tentacles in your books, too, don't you? I should've expected this.

Deathmask: What's so wrong with that? Let's enjoy the opportunity for some tentacle play while we can, my sisters.

GM: With a giant plume of water, a large, cylindrical body shoots out of the water, bristling with tentacles. It's a Roper, and there's a gigantic mouth in the center of its torso that it uses to consume whatever's caught in its tendrils!

Tsukiko: It's gonna eat us, guys! Now's no time for talk about tentacle play!

Deathmask: I'm not gonna let any tentacles do *me* in! I let out a moan as the tentacles grope around my body. *Aiee. Oh nooo. Don't go in there... Eeee.*

Tsukiko: She's succumbed to them...

Sen: Can we cut through the tentacles with a knife?

GM: Sadly, all your equipment's left on the shore.

Miyako: What about attack magic? I can fire that off, right?

GM: Sure. It won't be as strong without your staff, but it's doable.

Miyako: Okay, I throw an Energy Bolt at the tentacle that's curled around me!

GM: Got it. It's point-blank range, so no need for an accuracy check. Roll for damage. One less die than usual without the staff.

Miyako: 2d plus 5... 13.

The bolt of lightning frizzled the tentacle, freeing Miyako's body from its grasp. Scrambling to shore, she picked her staff back up.

It wasn't clear whether the Roper had any sense of pain or not, but following the attack, it grew more frantic, its tentacles pursuing Miyako up to land.

“Okay, one more Energy Bolt!”

Miyako fired off another bolt at the tentacle that grabbed at her hand. The Roper sacrificed another feeler to protect it. A third bolt met the same fate—and even worse, new tentacles began to grow from the burnt stumps left by the ones she struck.

Miyako: I can't handle it by myself!

Tsukiko: Heh-heh-heh... Looks like it's time to bust out my trump card!

Miyako: Huh?!

Tsukiko: I use Unlimited Blade Wor— Wait, no, Phantom Smith to copy a longsword!

Focusing, Tsukiko summoned a longsword out of nowhere in her hand, surrounded by a swarm of glowing particles.



“Hyahh!”

Instead of swiping at the tentacle holding her down, she slashed the one holding the nearby Sen instead. The longsword she summoned performed just as well as a real one, slicing right through the appendage and freeing Sen from the scourge. Immediately afterward, it faded into a mass of light and disappeared.

“Th-thanks, sister! But why me first?”

Tsukiko, still restrained, flashed a cheerful smile at Sen’s confused question. “Heh... It’s my job as an elder sister to help out my younger ones first!”

“Tsukiko...”

“...Hey, I’m your sister, too?” Deathmask complained.

“I thought you were enjoying the tentacle play.”

“I—I’ll help you in a second, Deathmask...”

Able to move freely again, Sen quickly picked up her dagger and bow, striking at the Roper alongside Miyako.

Unable to fend off the double-barreled attack, the monster released Tsukiko and Deathmask in short time.

“Right... How dare you probe us with your filthy, disgusting tentacles! You deserve no less than a thousand deaths!”

“Sorry, but our little tentacle foreplay session is over.”

The Roper was not that gifted of a fighter, and with four against one, it was dispatched quickly.

GM: So despite the unwanted company, you can rest for real now. Good job.

Tsukiko: Ha! You shameless, tentacle-obsessed...!

Deathmask: I’m gonna have to call him Prince Tentaclewhore from now on.

GM: Please don’t, thanks.

Their HP and MP healed from the Roper encounter, the four sisters plunged back into the forest.

Before long, they uncovered the fort the orcs were using as their stronghold. Avoiding a direct confrontation, they decided to wait until sundown. Binding the torches and oil they’d brought with them in rope, they set fire to the fort. Deathmask contributed with Lilim’s Kiss to let Miyako pitch in with a barrage of powered-up Fireballs. The orcs were fried before they ever got to fight.

The strategy made Haruto sweat bullets. “...I never expected that from the player side,” he griped.

After wiping up the stragglers who managed to escape the flames, the four sisters explored the burnt-out fort. In its basement,

they discovered evidence of some terrifying research that took place here—forbidden experiments into controlling monsters like soldiers, with the orcs serving as their test subjects.

According to the orders they found in the same room, this was all masterminded by Lloyd, son of the town's lord and Sylvia's elder brother.

Tsukiko: Whoa, what a shocking revelation.

Deathmask: Yeah, big surprise.

Tsukiko: Maybe this was Sylvia's aim the whole time, huh?

Deathmask: Quite the schemer behind that pretty little face!

GM:You don't have to rub it in, guys.

Delving deeper into the fort, the four sisters recovered the most obvious nearby treasure. It included some mithril Miyako could use for her Thor's Bullet attack.

"Nice! Now I've finally got a railgun!"

"Yeah, even if Sylvia wants us dead, we can always get her back with that."

"...It's called 'Thor's Bullet,' remember. Not a railgun."

The party then returned to the town of Aegis, handed the written orders they found to Sylvia, and reported on what they saw. Lloyd was arrested for making the orcs attack the nearby villages, and Sylvia was thus placed next in line for the title of town lord.

GM: As he's trundled off by the constables, Lloyd shouts: "I was trying to protect this country! We have to complete that research and strengthen our military forces, or else the Empire...the Empire of Horn River will conquer us all!"

Sen: Horn River?

Tsukiko: Horn...River... I'm too boneheaded of a princess to know what that means, but I never knew there was an empire named that! Certainly *not* an empire associated with any real-life groups or publishers!

GM: The Empire of Horn River—a fairly pat name for a country, perhaps, but it's actually one of the largest nations on the continent, boasting what's easily its most powerful military. It is served by several well-trained army corps, allowing it to steamroll over any neighboring countries with awe-inspiring force. The principality of Midfield that the four of you ran away from was annexed by Horn River several years ago. One year back, it forged an alliance with the kingdom of Godwan, essentially absorbing the kingdom into its own empire. Using Godwan's unique technology, it has grown into an even

more formidable force. Some say it could conquer the entire land sooner or later.

Deathmask: Wow. That has nothing at all to do with reality, I'm sure, but it definitely sounds scary.

GM: Anyway, Lloyd continues shouting. "Sylvia! Please, you must continue my research and keep this country safe! Please...!"

Miyako: Um, was he actually a good guy, or...?

GM: Watching sadly as her brother is taken away, Sylvia turns to you. "I think my brother did what he did out of genuine concern for his native land. But he still dared to dabble in the forbidden arts, sacrificing the lives of innocent people for it, and that cannot be condoned. Thank you, adventurers, for stopping him..." And with that, she begins to cry.

Tsukiko: Oof... A younger sister, having to put her own brother in jail? What a sad ending...!

Sen: Yeah... Hope that doesn't have to happen again...

Miyako: Hmm... This doesn't really feel like it's over to me. I wish we could've slain some bad guy and really put a final period on this.

Deathmask: It's all Horn River's fault. Even though it has nothing to do with real-life organizations, we cannot let this be forgiven! If only someone would smash it down.

GM: Well, I'm sure we all have our own opinions of it, but that's the end of this scenario. Well done, everyone.

And so...the four players gave their GM a round of polite applause.

GM: Now it's time for you all to level up.

Sen: Level up?

GM: Every time you wrap up a scenario, the player characters gain a level and become stronger. You can adjust how you grow stronger to some extent, so think back to your previous adventure and figure out which stats you want to boost and which weaknesses you want to cover for.

Miyako: So there's going to be another scenario later?

GM: I'd sure like to have one, yeah... I guess you're not interested?

Miyako: Oh, no, I'd love to join in!

Tsukiko: Yeah. The story's starting to insinuate a buncha stuff, too.

Deathmask: I will continue to fight until the Empire of Horn River is well and truly defeated.

GM: Well, whether you fight the Empire or not, the four sisters' adventures have only just begun. So as part of the level-up process, all of you will see stat boosts that are dictated by your character type. You're then given five bonus points, which you can assign to any stats you want, except for your resistances and Movement. You can also

elect to save some bonus points for the next level-up session. Another option is to select a new skill to learn, which costs you five bonus points.

Sen: I see... Pretty important, then.

Miyako: I can't boost my Movement at all? I'd like to run around more in battle...

GM: Not by leveling up, but there's magic you can learn that'll let you temporarily boost that stat.

Carefully deliberating over their characters, each of the players performed their level-up bookkeeping. Here are their stats after the dust settled.

Tsukiko Midfield

PLAYER Itsuki Hashima AGE 17 GENDER ♀

External characteristics

A fetching, gallant young woman with long, black hair

Background

Second oldest in a group of four adventuring sisters

Hobbies

Googling herself

Likes

Shrimp, crabs, etc.

Dislikes

Cut for length.

Parameters

LV: 2 / Max HP: 33 / Max MP: 15 / Movement: 3 / Strength: 13 (3d)

Spirit: 9 (2d) / Magic: 9 (2d) / Agility: 12 (3d) / Dexterity: 9 (2d)

Luck: 10 (2d) / Wisdom: 9 (2d) / Charisma: 10 (2d) / Intuition: 12 (3d)

[Resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Cutting: 70 / Bludgeoning: 80 / Piercing: 80 / Heat: 100 / Cold: 100

Electrocution: 100 / Holy: 100 / Dark: 100

[Status ailment resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Poison: 100 / Sleep: 100 / Confusion: 100 / Paralysis: 100 / Petrification: 100

Magic Bind: 100 / Arm Bind: 100 / Leg Bind: 100

Actions

Flowing Slash: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +8
2d+7 cutting damage on a single target.

Horizontal Stab: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +7
2d+7 piercing damage on a single target.

Shield Bash: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +6.
1d+7 bludgeoning damage on a single target. Pushes target
back 1 square.

Protect: Consumes 0 MP. Takes all damage dealt to a neighboring character.

Taunt: Consumes 0 MP. Turns one enemy's attention to herself. Accuracy
defined as Charisma +10.

Unique skill

Phantom Smith: Can copy any weapon she has seen at least once in the game and perform that weapon's intrinsic actions. The copied weapon disappears after the action is complete. Consumes MP depending on the weapon copied.

Currently copiable weapons: Longsword, Knife, Short Bow, Wood Mace, Club, Orcish Ax, Roper Tentacle

Inventory

Potion × 2



Sen Midfield

PLAYER Chihiro Hashima AGE 16 GENDER ♀

External characteristics

Kind of girlish? She has a ribbon on.

Background

Second youngest of the four adventuring sisters

Hobbies

Cooking, sports

Likes

Cute things

Dislikes

Liars

Parameters

LV: 2 / Max HP: 21 / Max MP: 18 / Movement: 4 / Strength: 8 (2d)
 Spirit: 8 (2d) / Magic: 6 (2d) / Agility: 17 (3d) / Dexterity: 15 (3d)
 Luck: 14 (3d) / Wisdom: 10 (2d) / Charisma: 8 (2d) / Intuition: 14 (3d)
 [Resistances (lower numbers are better)]
 Cutting: 100 / Bludgeoning: 100 / Piercing: 100 / Heat: 100 / Cold: 100
 Electrocution: 100 / Holy: 100 / Dark: 100
 [Status ailment resistances (lower numbers are better)]
 Poison: 100 / Sleep: 100 / Confusion: 100 / Paralysis: 100 / Petrification: 100
 Magic Bind: 100 / Arm Bind: 80 / Leg Bind: 80

Actions

Arrow: Range 5. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Dexterity +5. 1d+7 piercing damage on a single target.
 Knife: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Dexterity +10. 1d+9 cutting/piercing damage on a single target.
 Unlock: Consumes 0 MP. Success defined as Dexterity +5. Opens the locks on doors and treasure chests.
 Detect Trap: Consumes 0 MP. Success defined as Intuition +5. Discovers traps before they are set off.
 Taunt: Consumes 0 MP. Turns one enemy's attention to herself. Accuracy defined as Charisma +10.
 Cooking: Consumes 0 MP. Success defined as Dexterity +5. Cooks any food items in inventory.

Unique skill:

Jaldabaoth: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +3. Cancels all magic touched by her hand, whether attack or healing types. Automatically destroys any magical items touched.

Inventory

Rabbit Meat x2, Deer Meat x1, Roasted Orcish Meat x2, Herbs, Wild Strawberries



Miyako Midfield

PLAYER

Miyako
Shirakawa

AGE

20

GENDER

♀

External characteristics

Kind of like Mikoto Misaka

Background

Elders of the four adventuring sisters

Hobbies

Shopping

Likes

People who try really hard

Dislikes

People who make fun of them for it

Parameters

LV: 2 / Max HP: 17 / Max MP: 35 / Movement: 2 / Strength: 5 (1d)

Spirit: 11 (2d) / Magic: 18 (4d) / Agility: 7 (2d) / Dexterity: 7 (2d)

Luck: 10 (2d) / Wisdom: 14 (3d) / Charisma: 11 (2d) / Intuition: 8 (2d)

[Resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Cutting: 100 / Bludgeoning: 100 / Piercing: 100 / Heat: 80 / Cold: 80

Electrocution: 50 / Holy: 100 / Dark: 100

[Status ailment resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Poison: 100 / Sleep: 100 / Confusion: 100 / Paralysis: 100 / Petrification: 100

Magic Bind: 80 / Arm Bind: 100 / Leg Bind: 100

Actions

Staff Strike: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. 1d+2 bludgeoning damage on a single target.

Fireball: Range 4. Consumes 3 MP. 2d+7 heat damage to enemies within range.

Ice Needle: Range 4. Consumes 3 MP. 2d+12 cold/piercing damage to enemies within range.

Energy Bolt: Range 3. Consumes 4 MP. 3d+7 electrocution damage to enemies within range.

Light Wing: Range 1. Consumes 3 MP. Boosts single character's Movement by +2 for 3 turns. Not stackable.

Unique skill

Thor's Bullet: Range 10. Consumes 15 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +10. 5d+20 piercing/bludgeoning/electrocution damage on a single target. Consumes 1 mithril piece.

Inventory

Potion x2, Mithril x1



Deathmask Midfield

PLAYER

Nayuta Kani

AGE

10

GENDER

♀

External characteristics

Silver-haired Lolita type

Background

Youngest of the four adventuring sisters

Hobbies

Having sex with big sis Tsukiko

Likes

Sex

Dislikes

Those other guys

Parameters

LV: 2 / Max HP: 23 / Max MP: 24 / Movement: 3 / Strength: 12 (3d)

Spirit: 15 (3d) / Magic: 10 (2d) / Agility: 9 (2d) / Dexterity: 9 (2d)

Luck: 11 (2d) / Wisdom: 13 (3d) / Charisma: 12 (2d) / Intuition: 13 (3d)

[Resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Cutting: 100 / Bludgeoning: 100 / Piercing: 100 / Heat: 100 / Cold: 100

Electrocution: 100 / Holy: 80 / Dark: 80

[Status ailment resistances (lower numbers are better)]

Poison: 80 / Sleep: 80 / Confusion: 80 / Paralysis: 80 / Petrification: 80

Magic Bind: 100 / Arm Bind: 100 / Leg Bind: 100

Actions

Mace: Range 1. Consumes 0 MP. Accuracy defined as Agility +3.
2d+5 bludgeoning damage on a single target.

Heal: Range 3. Consumes 2 MP. Automatically succeeds.
Heals 1d+8 HP on a single target.

Cure Poison: Range 2. Consumes 2 MP. Success defined as Spirit +5.
Eliminates poison effects on a single target.

Holy Light: Range 3. Consumes 3 MP. 2d+7 holy damage on a single target.

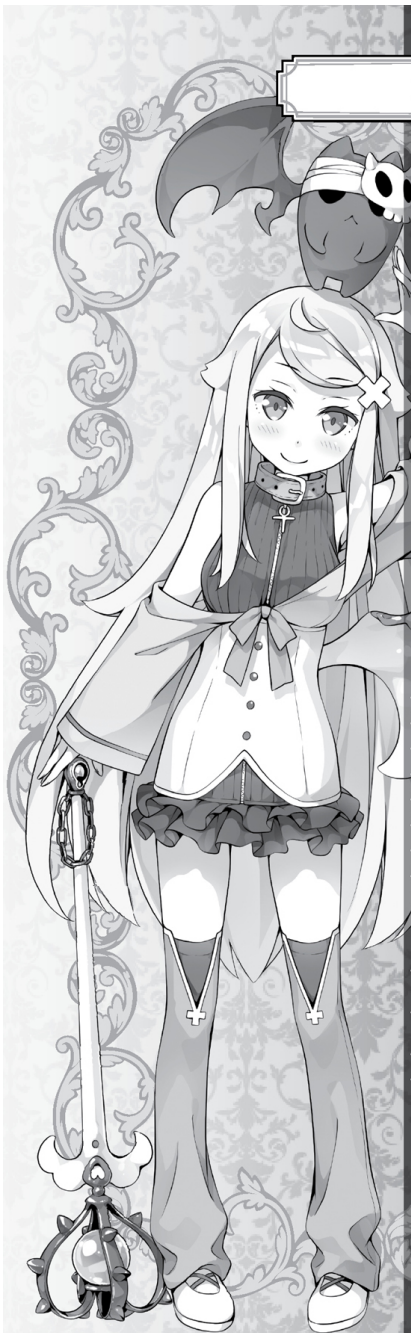
Barrier: Range 2. Consumes 4 MP. Covers a single character in a barrier
that absorbs up to 12 damage. The barrier's resistances are 100 for
all stats.

Unique skill:

Lilim's Kiss: Range 1. Consumes all MP and makes character skip the next
turn. Automatically succeeds if target allows it; if not, accuracy defined as
Dexterity +0. Strengthens the target via membrane-based contact. For the
next 3 turns, all parameters on the target except HP, MP, and movement are
boosted 1.3x and all resistances are doubled. Target can use 1 extra die
while in effect.

Inventory

Magic Potion x1, Stimulant x1, Sedative x1



Being able to do more with Phantom Smith meant that Tsukiko decided to use her bonuses to prop up her stats. Sen obtained a skill to make use of the ingredient items she found. Miyako obtained magic to boost her Movement and Deathmask got a defense spell.

So the four sisters successfully completed their first adventure. How would their future quests unfold? And what fate would befall this magical land, which was totally fictitious and had nothing to do with the real world?

Nobody can say...since Haruto hadn't thought about it yet.

To be continued...

It Happens, Man: Anime Adaptation

101

“Well, I better go back for the night. I made some roast beef and stuff for you guys in the fridge, so feel free to have some.”

Once the RPG session ended, Chihiro prepared to head home. He had just begun his second year of high school, and tomorrow was a school day. It was already late—and while their parents knew not to expect their child back early, coming home after the late-night anime block ended was out of the question.

“The buses have probably stopped running by now. You should take a taxi back,” Itsuki said, giving him a 5,000-yen bill.

“Oh, that’s fine. There’s still the train.”

“Yeah, but it’s a long walk between the station and home. No need to make people worry about you.”

“Yeah... All right,” Chihiro said, blushing a little and accepting the bill. “I’ll give you the change back next time.”

“Don’t worry about it. Think of it as an allowance.”

“Oh, I can’t do that. I’ll pay you back later on.”

Itsuki was already funding the food for Chihiro’s cooking, of course, but no matter how much he insisted on his brother keeping the change, Chihiro always stubbornly gave back the exact amount on the receipt. You couldn’t get that level of cooking at a restaurant even if you paid three times as much, but for some reason, his brother was always really weird about money.

“Thanks again, guys! I’ll watch the anime at home.”

With a bow, Chihiro left the room.

“You’ve got such a nice younger brother,” Haruto marveled. “Wish I had one like him. My sister’s just the worst... I bet *he* could teach her a thing or two.”

“Yeah, Chihiro’s pretty well put together... A little sister is worthy of high praise by virtue of her mere existence, but I don’t think your sister’s some exceptional rare species of non-sisterliness. It’s just that my brother’s overwhelmingly superior.”

“Species”? Dude. I mean, apart from her personality, my sister’s pretty perfect...but, yeah, personality’s probably the most important

part. Sorry.”

He recalled how, when he mentioned this morning to his sister that he was going to watch episode one at Itsuki's place, she flew into a sudden rage and verbally beat him to a pulp. It made him visibly wince. There really *was* nothing good about having a little sister.

“Well, you all hungry?” he said, trying to rally himself as he got the drinks and cooking ready.

There were roughly three hours left before the premiere of *Chevalier of the Absolute World*. It put Haruto on pins and needles, but the four of them would have to chill for just a bit longer, eating and drinking to pass the time.

“You never watched your white-box version?” Nayuta asked Haruto.

“It came in the mail yesterday, but no. I wanted to watch it live on TV and let the emotions move me in real time, you know?”

The “white-box version” was a DVD with the completed episodes written on them, passed out as samples to related parties. Despite being plain discs in jewel cases, they were still called “white boxes” in Japanese for historical reasons, dating back to when they were videocassettes in plain white cases.

These pressed discs were lower-quality and usually had issues that were fixed for the broadcast version, but generally featured the same content as what was shown on TV. Voice recording was generally done before actual animation, leaving actors to work with storyboards instead, so the only part of the *Chevalier* anime Haruto had seen so far was the tiny snippets from the preview videos.

“...Wait a second,” Itsuki said, looking confused. “I thought you said in the interviews that the battle scenes had tons of impact and I should ‘look forward to them’ and stuff.”

“Well, that’s how interviews are...”

Miyako's face stiffened. She had the feeling she had learned something she shouldn't have.

As they chatted, Haruto laid the spread out on the kotatsu table. There was roast beef, boiled mussels, clams steamed in wine, sauerkraut, marinated salmon, chicken rolls, a huge omelet stuffed with seasoned rice...

“We're meant to eat that big-ass omelet today, right?”

Haruto thought it best to confirm. It was easily hefty enough to feed three people on its own, so it certainly wasn't meant for Itsuki's lunch tomorrow.

“Yeah, he whipped that up specially for you.”

“Oh. It looks good...but why a rice omelet?”

“Chihiro asked me what you liked. I said you like maids, and he said he meant what kind of *food* you liked, so I said ‘I dunno,

whatever kind of food maids cook.’ So there you go. Maids make rice omelets; everyone knows that.”

“Um, yeah, I know that’s the typical offering at a maid café, but...”

“Exactly.”

“But I never said anything about enjoying maid cafés.”

“No?”

“No. I like maids in part because of the spirit they bring into their position, so I’m not attracted to some lady working part-time, dressing up as a maid and calling everyone who walks in the door ‘master.’ I want my maid to serve me, and me alone, I guess.”

The other three stared at Haruto as he laid out the details.

“Wow, Fuwa, you’re really...um...”

“You’re a plain old otaku on the inside, aren’t you?” Nayuta said, putting into words what Miyako couldn’t.

“N-no, not really, I’m just—”

“Given that you bought a hundred porn games in two years, I don’t think you got much room for excuses,” Itsuki mercilessly pointed out,

“Oh, all right, all right! I’m a total otaku at the core; you guys win. I got this look going just so I could look cool in college, too!”

Nayuta’s eyes opened wide as Haruto turned defiant. “Wow, Prince Manwhore, you mean you really aren’t a manwhore?”

“That’s what I’ve always *told* you!”

“So wait, are you, perhaps, Prince Chastity? Like, a total vir—”

“Stop! End of conversation! We got this huge omelet Chihiro made for us! Let’s write something on it with ketchup!”

Haruto grabbed a ketchup bottle, putting a forceful end to Nayuta’s accusation.

“Hmm,” Itsuki mused. “How about ‘Congrats on the Anime Launch!’ or something?”

“It’d be lame if I wrote that on myself. Someone else wanna do it?”

“Me and Myaa can. Give us a second to get ready, okay?”

Nayuta and Miyako left the living room. “Get ready?” a puzzled Haruto asked.

“Ah, just wait for ’em,” Itsuki advised.

“...?!”

After a moment, the two girls returned. They were dressed in maid outfits.

“Wha...?!”

Haruto’s eyes burst wide.

“Tee-hee-hee! What do you think, Itsuki?”

“I think I don’t give a crap about maids, just like I told you. Your

master for today's over there." Itsuki coldly ignored Nayuta and her smile.

"D-don't stare at me too much," said a clearly fidgety Miyako.

"Wow... You did this for me?" Haruto's mouth hung open.

"Sorry this is just cosplay instead of the real thing."

"This was Itsuki's idea, by the way."

Itsuki turned away, a little embarrassed. "Yeah, well... It's your special day, so..."

"Itsuki...!"

Haruto's eyes were dewy with pure emotion. The two girls were wearing stereotypical French maid outfits—definitely costumes, made from cheap fabric—but simply dressing up for his sake was enough to make him overjoyed.

"Heh... You happy? Don't say I never do anything for ya."

"...Yeah. Thanks, Itsuki."

As smug as Itsuki was acting, Haruto's thanks were genuine. Until...

"...What's *that* all about, Itsuki?"

"You dress us up as maids, and then you try to take all the credit? Talk about selfish!"

"Huh?" was all a confused Itsuki could manage to Nayuta and Miyako's protests.

"We actually purchased one more maid outfit, you know."

"Um...? Wait, Kanikou, you didn't..."

"Come this way, if you could, Itsuki."

Itsuki broke into a cold sweat as Nayuta and Miyako grinned at him.

"N-noooooooooo!!!"

Several minutes later...

"Ugh, why do I have to dress up like this...!"

Three maids appeared in the living room.

"Ha! Ahh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! But that actually looks good on you, Itsuki! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"I don't care!"

Itsuki blushed in shame at Haruto's uproarious laughter.

"It really does look nice on you," the mischievous Nayuta commented.

"Yeah, um... Yeah. It does," Miyako added, judging the look with nothing but complete seriousness.

"That doesn't make me happy, you know! Maid outfits like this give me nothing but bad memories—wait, never mind..."

Itsuki grabbed at the ketchup bottle, his face largely the same

color as its contents. “Let’s get this thing written! Con...grats...on... the...—Oh, shit, I’m running out of space.”

He made the classic rookie mistake of drawing the text too big to start. What was meant to be “Congrats on the Anime Launch!” sputtered out at “Congrats on the.”

“Wow, Itsuki, you’re more of the bumbling maid character.”

“What a klutz. Are you even literate?”

“Ugh...”

Itsuki gritted his teeth in frustration as the nearby veteran maids teased the new girl. Haruto, for his part, was actually digging the whole scene.

“Ah, don’t worry. I appreciate the thought a whole lot. Wanna crack open a beer?”

His first selection from the fridge was Gouden Carolus Cuvée van de Keizer Red. Gouden Carolus is the headline brand from Brouwerij Het Anker in Belgium, so named out of the brewery’s respect for the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, who was raised nearby their headquarters. “Keizer” is their top-of-the-line beer label, a limited-edition bottle released on Charles V’s birthday.

The taste is, in a word, delicious—enough to completely change the way one thinks about beer in a single mouthful. Super good.

The high-quality hops’ bitterness works together with the refreshing, citrus-like sweetness to make it hardly feel like you’re drinking a 10 percent beer at all, but slosh it around the tongue a bit, and you can feel all the complex herbs and spices in the flavor as well. It’s easy to drink, but more than stands up to deep taste analysis, making it hard to turn one’s head away from—it does for the drinker, in other words, what the ideal light novel should do for its readers.



Unlike light novels, however, this beer was a limited edition and had a price to match. It wasn't a session beer, but it was perfect for special occasions such as these.

"Here, I'll pour it."

Still blushing a bit, Itsuki the maid took the bottle from Haruto's hands and poured out a glass for him. The beer, an elegant shade of gold, filled the glass and developed a fine head that covered the surface. He then poured glasses for Miyako and himself, providing some ginger ale for Nayuta.

"My writing idol, dressed up as a maid, *serving* me...!"

"Shut up, Nayuta. You're just along for the ride... You may offer a toast, master."

"Sure. Well... Cheers!"

""""Cheers!""""

Ting!

Everyone's glasses clinked as they took a gulp.

"Whoa, this is really good!" Miyako exclaimed, it being her first time trying it.

"Isn't it?" Haruto boasted.

"Oooh, wish I could drink it," Nayuta grumbled.

"Go have a juice box or something, kid," Itsuki replied. "...Ooh, this is good..."

"But you guys all drank while *you* were underage, didn't you?"

Nayuta sounded pretty sure of the answer as she asked.

"Wh-what makes you say that?" Miyako countered.

"Well, Prince Manwhore is one thing, but Itsuki and Myaa, you seem a little *too* used to drinking, I think. That was definitely my impression when I saw you guys in Okinawa. You're still both only twenty, right? Not even a year over the drinking age. Normally people your age would be having fruity mixed drinks and trying to act all adult with that."

"Pfft! You have to be kidding me. I've been a man of refined tastes from the very beginning!"

"Y-yeah, me, too," Miyako said. "And you sure have a hostile impression of what being twenty's like! It's not *un*-true, but..."

"Well, either way, we can drink, all right? And you can't! Heh-heh-heh! It's time to face facts! Facts, Kanikou! Bah-ha-ha-ha!" Itsuki was trying his best to deflect Nayuta's astute accusation.

"Nnngh! This is why grown-ups are so unfair!"

"Ha! If it pisses you off that bad, hurry up and grow up!"

"What if I shout out 'I'm an adult!' pop out my tits and give you a big hug, Itsuki?"

"Then it'll be time to say good-bye."

“To your virginity?”

“No, to *you*! From the window!”

“From the window? That’s so mean!”

Nayuta pouted, then focused her attention on devouring the roast beef in revenge.

“Huh? Hey! There’s only twelve slices of roast beef! Three for each of us!”

“Ooh, I’m such a child, I don’t know how to do arithmetic too well. Mmm, this meat is yummmm-my! You grown-ups can just keep sipping on your beer, thanks!”

“Ughhh…”

“You people are all children,” Haruto laughed as the two of them carried on. He did indeed keep sipping on his beer, pausing for just a moment to fire off a tweet: “Only two hours until the big anime launch! My heart’s starting to race! Have fun watching it, guys! I’m watching with Itsuki at his place (° ε ^)”

The alcohol addling everyone’s brains only added to the excitement, and the room was soon filled with laughter. Wonderful food, wonderful beer—and wonderful friends. Time flew by, and by the time *Chevalier of the Absolute World*’s hour crept up, Haruto couldn’t have felt better about himself. “Here we go, guys! \ (^▽^)/”, he tweeted as the four of them gathered around the TV.

There, Haruto’s happiness met its end.



It was thirty minutes after the episode began.

The end credits were over, the “Next Episode” blurb was over, and the subsequent program was already running, but Haruto still sat glassy-eyed in front of the TV, not moving a muscle.

The cause of this was clear enough that Itsuki, Miyako, and Nayuta didn’t say anything. They couldn’t. So they watched Haruto nervously. The TV was playing a romantic-comedy anime—another episode one premiere, just like *Chevalier of the Absolute World*. There was a girl, looking perfectly normal, in front of a perfectly normal background, moving around perfectly normally, speaking perfectly normal lines.

“...Sure must be nice,” Haruto muttered as he watched.

Unable to endure any more, Itsuki shut off the TV with the remote.

To be totally blunt, episode one of the *Chevalier of the Absolute*

World anime was trash.

First, the animation work was terrible, something even an amateur could see. The characters were all bungled, and sometimes the same character would look completely different in another scene. Even Itsuki, who had read the entire series, wasn't totally sure who was whom at times—if you came in with no knowledge of the original, it would have been utter confusion.

And it wasn't just the characters. The Calibre robots that were supposed to sell the show, and the Dragon foes they fought, were just as awful. Their designs had been simplified to some extent out of necessity, the original illustrations being too intricately detailed to animate, but they had failed to execute even on those simplified looks. Haruto had been promised that these new designs would result in much more fluid animation, but the episode was filled to the brim with still shots, making it hard to figure out how the battle was unfolding at all. Even the climax of episode one, with the protagonist using a finisher skill to mow down a horde of foes, was brushed off with a single still piece of art. It truly stumped the audience in Itsuki's room.

Next, the main cast. Simply put, their acting skills weren't there. The fetching heroines were played by rookie voice actresses, all of them nearly brand-new to the industry, and while some of them had voices to match their characters (and some absolutely didn't), they were all poor at their roles, across the board, to one extent or another. The protagonist was played by a more well-known actor, one who had multiple hero roles under his belt, and a lot of the supporting cast was just as experienced, which made the heroines' subpar performances stand out even more. The women all sang together as a group for the ending theme, and that wasn't too great, either. Plus, the song itself was a frenetic, high-tempo dance piece that was a complete mismatch for the story setting.

The auditions held for the main cast had featured a plethora of more talented veterans and popular voice actresses. Haruto had naturally submitted a few names he'd like to see in the recording booth, but he got shut down. As a producer or some other TV bigwig had told him, "We want a fresh feel with some new people. It'll be harder to organize public events with voice talent who're already well known, but with rookies, we can organize a music group with them and hold live concerts."

Also, the story was shit.

The books went through the trouble of describing the protagonist's life and troubles before being selected by his Calibre and fighting as a royal knight. But in order to compress the story enough

to keep the aforementioned climax scene in episode one, the hero's motivations were completely glossed over, the heroines' motives for caring about the hero more or less pushed upon the viewer, and almost no time was given to describe the setting.

Haruto had heard all about how the anime format allowed the setting to be described visually, not just with words, but the backdrops and buildings were just as humdrum as the characters, so it gave hardly any information. Thanks to all the nonsensical cuts made to the original books' dialogue, there were a lot of scenes where conversational lines didn't even correctly connect with each other. Haruto had gone over all the scripts, making sure everything made sense while being cut down to the needed length—he had no idea how it wound up like this.

“...I had kind of a bad feeling when the white-box version came to me just a day before the premiere, really...heh-heh... I guess I didn't watch it because I was too scared to.” Haruto chuckled drily to himself, then sighed, as if his very soul were escaping his lips. “Dahhh... I worked hard on it, too...”

It was so pathetic to watch that nobody else in the room could say anything.

Realizing that he was harshing the buzz, Haruto tried his best to brighten up.

“Well, that's over! Time to drink some more! I brought a bunch of other beer over today, so let's keep it flowing!”

He whisked himself over to the fridge, grabbed a bottle at random, sloshed it into a glass, and took a long gulp.

“Mmm, this beer is good! It really is...”

The alcohol that made everything seem happier a mere thirty minutes ago now amplified all his negative emotions. He was almost in tears.

Itsuki reluctantly spoke up. “Umm... Well, I dunno what I should say, but...”

“Nnnh, yeah...”

“But we're not here writing anime pitches! We're writing novels! So even if the anime's, like...that...don't worry about it. Um, if you can...”

Haruto snorted at Itsuki's feeble attempt to cheer him up. “Yeah. Well, guess I'll just forget about the anime and work hard to make my manuscripts more interesting... I guess that's the best way to deal with this, huh...?”

If it was something anyone could deal with.

Up to now, somewhere in his heart, Haruto had thought of his novels as something like industrial goods. Before he made his debut, he conducted a careful study of which books sold well, which

characters were popular, what kind of plot elements were in vogue, and he reflected all of that in his work. *Chevalier of the Absolute World* was the result of this carefully calculated study, and despite the cold comments the judges for the new-writers award gave him, it was the clear number-one hit of that year's batch, and now it was an anime.

Everything's precalculated... I'm only writing this stuff for work...

With something like *Chevalier of the Absolute World*, no matter how much it was trashed by the so-called educated fan base—no matter how much those anonymous idiots claimed it was “written with a template,” or “to serve the needs of the plot at all costs,” or “selling solely on the strength of its art”—as long as it sells well, that's all that matters. No feeling about it...

...Is that really the case? It can't be!

Even if he had carefully analyzed the marketplace to craft his story and characters, he was the one who stepped up to write the damn thing.

I like it. I like how cool the hero is, and how all these cute girls are crazy about fawning over him. I like how he gets mega-strong, beats this mega-evil dude, and neatly saves the day. I like how people are rewarded for their efforts. I like how kind, gentle people wind up happy. I like dudes cutting loose and beating the crap out of other dudes. I like harems. I like panty shots. I like dudes getting said panty shots through sheer luck. I like maids. I like heroines who fall head over heels for people at first sight. I like kindhearted big-sister types who'll unconditionally do anything to care for you. That's what I'm writing for.

I want to get summoned to this world of swords and sorcery. I want to go on a big adventure. I like the idea of someone being the “only one,” the “number one,” the single golden child out of the entire world. I look up to that. I really do.

The sight of a courageous protagonist stepping up before thousands of foes, just when he's about to falter, makes me want to take heart, too. I shed tears when I wrote my guest heroine sacrificing herself to save the hero's life. I was the one who created that situation, but it still hurt me so much that I cried.

I can say this with absolute certainty now. I love Chevalier of the Absolute World. If I didn't, how could I have written thirteen whole volumes, a good one and a half million Japanese characters' worth, strictly because it was my job?

This isn't some mass-manufactured product. It's sad and frustrating whenever someone makes fun of me. It pisses me off so much, I want to kill them. Getting praise from my readers makes me happy; I put all my fan letters in a safe and read them over and over again. When the manga version came out really great, I was so happy to read each chapter that I wanted to literally jump for joy.

And the anime version was just that shitty, and that's why I'm sobbing.

“...I love this thing, man... I really love it...! Maybe you guys think of it as just another title in the catalog, but to me, this was like nothing else in the world...! I loved this thing, for fuck's sake! Why don't these bastards understand that?! Fuck 'em... Fuck each and every one of 'em...!”

Haruto stared at the tabletop as he shed his tears.

Then he heard someone else sniffing.

“...?”

He looked up, puzzled, only to find Miyako, her face a wet, hot mess as she sobbed.

“Whoa! W-wait, why're you crying, Miyako?”



“Cause she’s Myaa, that’s why,” Nayuta explained, looking at her fondly.

“...No, really, why? You didn’t even write it,” asked a concerned Itsuki.

Miyuki wiped off her face with one corner of the duvet running along the side of the table. “...Well, I’m... I’m not a writer, and I don’t know how it feels to have your book made into an...an anime...! But...!”

She looked toward Haruto with her reddened eyes.

“But even I know it’s sad when...when you try really hard at something, and it blows up on you!”

Then she went back to sobbing, Haruto staring on dumbfounded. He wasn’t sure when, but he had stopped crying.



Politely waiting for Miyako to regain her composure, Haruto stood up.

“...Right. Sorry, but I’m gonna head out. I’m probably gonna start acting like a dick again if I keep drinking.”

He chuckled to himself.

“The trains haven’t started running yet.”

“I’ll take a taxi. It’ll cost a bit, but screw it. I *am* successful enough to have my work made into anime, remember.”

With that last bit of self-deprecating humor, Haruto packed up his things and left.

“...You think Fuwa will be okay?” a concerned Miyako asked.

Itsuki and Nayuta didn’t have an answer.

Balmung and Excalibur

Back home from Itsuki's apartment, Haruto turned on his computer and checked out the initial episode one feedback on the net. It wasn't great. In fact, between "Shitty" this and "It makes no sense" that and "Totally worthless" and "I'm one-and-done on this one" and "Is this like a practice anime for new voice talent" and "Over practically before it began," it was downright depressing.

A lot of people bashed the director, the scriptwriter, and the production company. Fans of the original books were particularly virulent in their hate for the anime staff, going all the way up to threatening violence.

I wish I had someone to hate for this, too, he thought. *It'd be nice if I could innocently paint the anime staff as the bad guys and come to terms with my own feelings.*

Between signing on for the anime and this moment, he had met with and spoken to the director, the scriptwriter, the producer, the cast, and many other people involved with the show. He went out for drinks with some of them. He didn't dislike any of them at all—it's hard to really hate someone once you know their face. Plus, even if he hadn't met anyone at all, it's not like anyone on the team was thinking "Let's make this anime as shitty as possible." That much was easy to understand. He knew nobody had evil intentions, so he couldn't hate anyone for it.

Even the main voice talent, cast due to motives almost wholly unrelated to their talent, had worked hard to exploit the opportunity they'd been given. He knew that. When the very worst rookie member of the cast came up to him during the episode one recording sessions and said, "Thanks for giving me this chance, Mr. Fuwa," he could feel the appreciation, the passion, the fretfulness. It was undoubtedly the real thing. And even the producer who forced this cast on him did so because he thought it'd spice up the live events—that wasn't a lie.

Nobody in this industry *didn't* give a hundred percent. Nobody *didn't* struggle, with everything they had. They were shedding their blood, sweat, and tears out there, constantly being afraid of getting run over, consumed, and stepped on without any mercy. So why doesn't it turn out well sometimes?

Before going to bed, Haruto decided to call his editor, Kawabe. It was the middle of the night, but he answered.

Kawabe had needed to duck out of today's anime viewing party at the last minute because he was off to Kyoto, where OKINA, illustrator for the book series, lived. As he put it, when OKINA watched the white-box disk, he shouted, "I didn't work so hard on these books for *this* piece-of-shit anime!", so Kawabe had felt obligated to travel to Kyoto to soothe his damaged ego.

It was funny, but hearing that made Haruto happy. OKINA really cared about this thing, too. He was a veteran, having handled mech designs on a number of robot anime. Haruto heard that he was reluctant to take on book illustration work for a brand-new author. He could be moody and hard to please. Haruto had only met him once, at a book signing when the anime was first announced. Hearing how angry he was about all this...oddly reassured him.

"...Mr. Kawabe, why did the anime wind up like that?"

"Well," Kawabe replied, "this isn't one-hundred-percent confirmed information..."

Then he let him in on what he knew.

It turned out that the production company animating *Chevalier of the Absolute World* was producing two other shows for this TV season at the same time. One of them was based on a big-name light novel series from a large publisher, and apparently it had been pretty tough progress on that one. Screwing that project up would have put the company's future in serious jeopardy, but none of their production lines really had the free time to help out with other people's projects. If someone had to jump to another series, the series that lost that personnel paid for it in quality. With *Chevalier* in particular, the art director, more familiar with the books than the director himself, wound up leaving midway, leading to things like dialogue getting cut which absolutely shouldn't have been—that kind of thing.

Again, Haruto found himself wondering what went wrong. Was it that large rival publisher? Was it the big-name title they were pushing? Was it the staff on that project, unable to take the heat by themselves? Was it the board of directors on the production company, willing to abandon their other projects for the sake of one big one? Or was it the whole company's fault for taking on three anime series at once, something they clearly weren't capable of handling?

...Or is it my fault for writing a series that couldn't take priority above that big title?

No answer immediately came.



It was about ten days since the episode one broadcast. Haruto still hadn't fully recovered. He had locked himself in his room, unable to write or even read. Instead he was doing stuff like bashing up armies of foot soldiers in *Warriors*-style games, binge-watching *Shirobako* and whining about how "this isn't the anime production company *I* know" and "If I had Aoi Miyamori showrunning on *Chevalier*..." and other nonsense. That, and engaging in long conversations with Siri.

Even his sister, usually griping at him about something or other, could read the writing on the wall. She was leaving him alone, and any anime that made even his sister care about his well-being must have been very shitty indeed.

He had held out some hope that things would improve in Episode 2. They didn't. The production company was focusing all its resources on the big-name title they had to make good on. There was little to no chance of a sudden massive upswing in quality at this point. The first anime adaptation of Haruto's work was a failure.

It was worth mentioning, by the way, that the net gestalt about the big-name title wasn't exactly rosy, either. Haruto wasn't sure whether to say "You had it coming, bitches" or "Come on, guys; if you're using *my* anime as a springboard, you gotta work harder than that." It was tough.

So as Haruto sat there agonizing in bed, he received a sudden call on his smartphone. It was from Itsuki. They hadn't spoken for the past ten days, where before they'd usually hang out once every three. It felt like forever.

"Hey."

"Haruto?"

"Yeah."

"Come with me to Akihabara today."

"Huh?"

"I'll meet you by the Electric Town gate at two, got it?"

"H-hey, wait a—"

Then Itsuki hung up on him.

"What the hell's that about?" He sighed as he reluctantly got up and prepared to leave the house for the first time in a while.



A bit past two p.m., Itsuki and Haruto were standing by the light novel corner of one of Akihabara's many shops that cater to otaku audiences.

The shock of the whole anime ordeal had made Haruto totally forget about it, but today was the launch date for *Chevalier of the*

Absolute World, Volume 13. Copies of it were stacked up in the store's new-release section up front. There were other new books around it, but Haruto's Volume 13 had a far larger stack than any other release. A little ways away, in the light novel department, Volumes 1 through 12 were on display with their front covers fully visible, all blaring "TV Anime Airing Now!!" on the obi wrap over the cover.

Being Saturday, the store was packed with customers. As the two of them milled around the new-releases section, they spotted several people picking up Volume 13 and taking it to the checkout line. Over in the rear shelves, a kid around middle-school age grabbed a copy of Volume 1.

"...Somebody watched *that* anime and it actually inspired him to buy my book?" Haruto softly whispered.

He couldn't tell if the kid actually liked the anime. Maybe the plot was so hard to follow, he wanted to buy the book to catch up. *But whatever the reason*, Haruto thought from the heart, *it'll be nice if he likes my story*.

"...Thanks for inviting me, Itsuki. I'm glad I got to see this."

"Mm? Yeah."

Itsuki seemed oddly distracted by his heartfelt thanks.



They went on to visit around seven bookstores in the Akihabara area. All of them had *Chevalier of the Absolute World* on conspicuous display in the shop, and they spotted people making purchases at each location.

For an author, getting a work made into anime was *maybe* a once-in-a-lifetime event. The damage from having the results fall apart in front of your eyes wouldn't be repaired that easily. But witnessing all these readers before him, Haruto felt deeply, from his soul, that he had to try again. His passion was starting to burn once more.

...Meanwhile, almost in inverse proportion to Haruto's soaring spirits, Itsuki was clearly growing angrier with every bookstore they visited.

He must have invited Haruto to Akihabara to cheer him up. It was his way of saying: *See? Look. Maybe the anime's shitty, but it's served its purpose. It's advertising your novels. The anime launch is making all the stores push your books as much as possible, and that's paying off with all the new readers you got. Isn't that great?*

Getting dragged over here and really seeing all these new and old series fans buying his novels had done wonders for Haruto's disposition.

But though today marked the release of Volume 13 of Haruto's *Chevalier of the Absolute World*, it was also the launch date for Volume 5 of *Sisterly Combat*.

Haruto's and Itsuki's new volumes were generally both in the new-release stacks of the stores they visited, but the *Chevalier* stacks were overwhelmingly larger. Just a couple minutes of waiting at any store rewarded them with the sight of someone making a *Chevalier* purchase; it took several times that to spot a *Sisterly Combat* buyer.

It wasn't that Itsuki's new volume was a flop. It just meant that Haruto sold a hell of a lot more novels than he did. But seeing the difference play out so physically like this was still a cruel sort of frustration.



"Well, we both know how the anime turned out, but—hey, an anime's still big news. It means they'll print more copies, and that's bound to boost any series, you know?"

After three hours on their feet, running around bookstores, they were at a diner for supper and a little rest. Itsuki was downright disgruntled by this point, and now it was Haruto trying to smooth things over.

"...I'm aware of that," Itsuki growled. "But...it still pisses me off."

There was little Haruto could do. He knew logic couldn't do much to stem the frustration at times like these. So he opted not to pursue it any further.

"...My latest volume is my greatest masterpiece ever," Itsuki whispered, his voice low.

No volume before had been this grueling for him, but none before had excited him this much. He was absolutely positive that this was the greatest piece of work to ever have the name "Itsuki Hashima" attached to it... And why stop at comparing it to only his own work?

"...I mean, really, I think it's the most incredible story in the universe."

"...Really?"

"...Better than *Bladedance of Elementalers*, better than *Ben-To*, better than *Oreshura*, better than *The 'Hentai' Prince and the Stony Cat*, better than *Jinsei*, better than *My Youth Romantic Comedy Is Wrong, As I Expected*...and I haven't read Volume 13 of *Chevalier* yet, but better than that, too! *Sisterly Combat*, Volume 5 beats 'em all!"

"Better," of course, was all in the eye of the beholder. Trying to build an absolute ranking was absurd—something Itsuki was fully

aware of.

But my novels are still the best. They're the best out there, so I want the most people reading them that I can get. That's what I think.

"...In the universe, huh?" Haruto chuckled at the brutal challenge Itsuki laid at his feet.

"Pfft," Itsuki replied, still disgruntled. "...I'll win someday."

"That's what *I* should be saying to *you*."

"...?"

Itsuki gave the honest reply an odd look. He had no idea how much Haruto envied his talent.

A waitress delivered their food right at that moment, giving Haruto the perfect chance to defer the subject with a smile. "Well, let's dig in. You helped me feel a lot better, so I'll pay for dinner."

"Whoa, really? Shit, I'm gonna get a hamburger steak, then."

It was like flipping a switch. Joy spread across his face as Itsuki called the waitress back.

"Oh, by the way, Itsuki, I wanted to ask you something."

"Hmm?"

Stabbing a fork into his salad, Haruto tried his best to make the question sound as casual and direct as possible.

"Is Miyako, like, seeing anyone right now?"

(The End)

Afterword

Thank you for picking up Volume 2 of *A Sister's All You Need*. If you enjoyed it, even a little bit, I couldn't be happier.

Right in the middle of writing this volume, I wound up moving to a new place. Running around all over the city, surrounded by mighty mountains of cardboard boxes, pestered endlessly by my editor Kenken—it wasn't as bad as what Itsuki experienced, but it was a battle like none I've had in quite a while. Looking back, I'm glad we got Volume 2 out, as much as I'd like my editor Iwaasa's dick to fall off.

By the way, IK Mansion—the apartment Itsuki lives in, mainly occupied by college students—is very heavily modeled after the place I lived in before the move. Itsuki has a slightly nicer pad, with a bit of a bigger kitchen and so on, but everyone who's been to my old joint ribbed me about it—“This is exactly like *your* apartment, isn't it?” In this room, just a few minutes' walk from the MF Bunko J editorial office, I'd play board games, hold drinking parties, host anime screenings, and so on with my friends, and all of that's getting used for story material now. It's maybe a bit sad to leave those memories behind with the old place, but at least I'll still get to poke around inside them within this series. I won't get kicked out that easily.

Volume 1 featured the cast doing almost nothing but play around, but this volume features Itsuki and friends working quite a bit more. As touched upon in the story, being an “author” can be an extremely unstable line of work. It has a lot of negatives attached, but in terms of being able to leverage everything you've experienced in life, nothing comes close, I don't think. It also means that *everything* about you connects to work, and whether that's a good thing or not is a seriously debatable topic.

Going forward, I plan to continue baring all within my heart, wringing out everything I've experienced, everything I haven't, everyone I've met, everyone I haven't, everything I've thought and imagined, everything fun and everything sad, and everything else, too, mixing truth with fiction as I craft this weird patchwork of a story that straddles the line between reality and make-believe. See you in Volume 3.

CORRECTION

The first printing of Volume 1 described Nayuta Kani as being the author of the “Seasons” series in places. This should be correctly referred to as the *Landscape* series. We regret any confusion caused by this.

[This correction only applies to the Japanese edition.]

CAUTION

This volume discusses Japanese hometown-tax system; however, in reality, the system is a tad more complex than how it’s described in the story. Those with an interest in taking advantage of it are advised not to take Itsuki’s experience at face value, and to instead consult with a licensed tax accountant. As in Volume 1’s “Die in a Fire, Tax Returns,” we did have an accountant look over the content of this volume for accuracy’s sake, but we’ve exaggerated a few things and glossed over a few others. This isn’t an issue for casual readers, but if you’re a professional writer, do *not* use this book as a reference!

Afterword



Oh, man. Volume 2. So exciting. The men's team sure played a big part in this one. I wasn't expecting Toki to become a regular!

For this afterword, I decided to draw Nayuta Kani. Considering how she almost shacked up with Itsuki, I feel like I didn't draw her too much this time. This series is all about getting its characters naked in amusing ways, it seems, but that really helps me out as an illustrator. Those without any art experience may not realize it, but it's actually

pretty uncommon to draw a character clothed from the get-go. First, you draw them naked, then you add on clothing. In other words, when they're nude in the story, I get to skip a step. Viva nudity!

¹ For example, an attack name written with the characters for “magic flame funeral strike” might need an accompanying ruby indicating that the reading is actually “Dark Flame Punisher.”

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